



DURBAN II DISGRACE

Australia has a long and proud history of supporting Israel. Under the previous Coalition Government Australia was one of the few countries to consistently oppose anti-Israel motions in the United Nations General Assembly. When Hezbollah and Hamas launched rocket attacks and kidnapped Israeli soldiers in 2006, Australia firmly supported Israel's right to defend its citizens and its territory. When Israel faced increasing rocket attacks from Hamas in the Gaza strip during December 2008, Australia was again steadfast in its support for Israel's right to defend itself.

That's why it was so disappointing that the Rudd Government agonised for so long about whether or not Australia would attend the UN's Durban Review Conference in Geneva this April, known as Durban II.

The original 'World Conference against Racism', ostensibly dedicated to anti-racism, was held in the South African city of Durban in 2001. Like all UN conferences, it welcomed the participation of all member states. Unfortunately, like many other UN conferences, it disproportionately singled out one member state for special attention.

Before the conference even began, draft text submitted contained gross attacks on Israel. Israel was described as a racist state. Zionism, the belief that Jews deserve a homeland in the Middle East, was equated with racism. Tirades about Israeli abuse and subjugation of Palestinians featured throughout the texts. It revived old and bitter debates within the UN, including a 1975 General Assembly motion which stated that "Zionism is racism", but which was sensibly overturned in 1991.

At the time, US Secretary of State Colin Powell denounced the conference for its "hateful language" and the fact that it had unfairly singled out Israel for specific criticism, unlike every other member state.

The behaviour of delegates to the conference is another example of its wildly anti-Israeli and even anti-Semitic nature. The Arab Lawyer's Union handed out cartoons which featured a picture of Hitler, and the words "If he had won there would be no Palestinian problem." Jewish delegates were vilified and abused by other participants.

So it should have been clear to the Australian Government than any re-run of the original Durban conference had the potential to descend into a typically one-sided anti-Israel hatefest. A clear and obvious pointer to this fact was a statement in the draft text for the 2009 conference which recognised and ratified the resolutions of the original Durban conference, the same conference which singled out Israel for special criticism.

Another pointer could have been the chair of the summit, Libya. Or some of the vice chairs including Iran and Cuba. Not exactly nations renowned for their long histories of anti-racism.

And yet it took Australia until 19 April 2009 – one day before the conference started, to decide to withdraw from the conference. We joined Canada, Israel, the United States, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Germany as well as other nations who sent token delegations. It was the right decision, but it was far too late.

It didn't have to be this way. Australia could have led the world in standing beside Israel and opposing predictable anti-Semitism. Canada announced in January 2008 that they would not participate. The United States made it clear in February 2009 they would not be participating. Italy made their position clear in March 2009. Yet Australia, a proud and vocal supporter of Israel, couldn't make up its mind until 19 April 2009 to withdraw.

As predicted, the conference quickly descended into farce. Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad launched a hateful anti-Israel tirade. It was nothing new from a man who once called for Israel to be wiped off the map and questioned both the extent and reality of the Holocaust. Yet many European nations theatrically walked out during his speech in protest. What were they expecting? Did they really think that any conference addressed by an anti-Semite and dangerous ideologue would be measured, tolerant and inclusive? Their theatrical walkout made for good TV but it was an empty gesture that cost them nothing. Boycotting a conference that descended into a predictable farce would have sent a much stronger signal.

This was not the first UN conference to be hijacked by despots and anti-Semites to unfairly attack Israel, and it certainly won't be the last. Australia, and other Western democracies who supposedly support Israel, should not forget this next time we receive out invitations.



Senator Mitch Fifield

Senator for Victoria

42 Florence St Mentone VIC 3194

Ph: 03 9584 2455 Email: senator.ffield@aph.gov.au