DANBY VERSUS HELD: THE STORY OF THE TWO JEWISH CANDIDATES IN MELBOURNE PORTS—TAKE TWO

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The federal electorate of Melbourne Ports has long been a safe Labor seat. It also has a high proportion of Jewish voters. Since 1998 it has been held by Michael Danby, a Jew and a strong supporter of Israel. Recent boundary and demographic changes may have made the seat marginal and in the 2007 election the Liberal Party selected Adam Held, another Jewish supporter of Israel, to run against Danby. Both emphasised their pro-Israel credentials but, while the swing to Labor was not as high as it was nationally, Danby increased his vote. With the aid of Greens preferences, he held the seat comfortably. Nevertheless, in six out of nine key Jewish booths a majority voted Liberal. The author argues that Jewish voters are only unified on the question of Israel; on other issues they are diverse. Some are attracted to the Liberals on economic questions and others to Labor and the Greens on social and environmental questions. But any candidate who did not support Israel would be unlikely to win Melbourne Ports.

The 2004 federal election featured for the first ever time in Australian political history a clash between two Jewish candidates representing the two major parties. The inner Melbourne seat of Melbourne Ports, which has the second largest number of Jews in any Australian electorate, was contested by the sitting Labor MP, Michael Danby, and the Liberal Party candidate, David Southwick. Danby eventually retained the seat narrowly with the aid of Greens preferences.

The 2007 federal election featured a rerun with Danby being opposed by another Jewish candidate in the Liberal Party's Adam Held. However, this time Danby held the seat comfortably, and appears to have gained a much larger share of the Jewish vote.

MELBOURNE PORTS

The seat of Melbourne Ports has primarily been held by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) since Federation. Only six members have represented the electorate. They include protectionist Samuel Mauger who held the seat from 1901 till 1906, and Labor representatives Jim Matthews, E.J. Holloway, Frank Crean, Clyde Holding and Michael Danby.

For most of this time, Melbourne Ports was a safe Labor seat. However, a redistribution prior to the 1990 election brought some more prosperous Liberal-voting areas into the electorate, and changed it to marginal status. It is now one of the most affluent ALP-held seats in the country. The electorate includes the port suburbs of Melbourne south of the Yarra as well as areas to the south-east including Port Melbourne, South Melbourne, Albert Park, South Yarra, St Kilda, Balaclava, Elwood, Elsternwick, and Caulfield.

In both the 1998 and 2001 federal elections, the ALP trailed the Liberal Party narrowly on primary votes, but held the seat comfortably by approximately five per cent after acquiring a high proportion of preferences from Democrats and Greens voters. In 2001, the combined Greens and Democrats vote was over 20 per cent.[1] In the 2004 federal election, the ALP trailed significantly by over 3000 votes on the primary vote, but was still able to hold the seat by 3.74 per cent with the assistance of Greens preferences. The Greens vote jumped to 14.10 per cent, but the Democrat vote fell away to 1.35 per cent.[2]

Melbourne Ports has a number of key voting blocs including the second highest

number of Jewish voters in an Australian electorate, estimated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics at 12.7 per cent or 18,026 voters,[3] and a large gay and lesbian community. The Jewish community itself is highly diverse and ranges from the ultra-orthodox Hassidim to the mainly secular recent Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Many may be reluctant for historical and political reasons to identify themselves as Jews by religion in the census so it is possible that the real number of Jewish residents in the electorate is much higher than the official figure. However, some Russian Jews may not yet be Australian citizens, and hence not eligible to vote.

Voters in Melbourne Ports have a reputation for holding socially progressive views in relation to issues such as the environment, and protecting the rights of disadvantaged groups afflicted by mental illness, drug use, and/or involvement in street sex work. One of the major local councils—the City of Port Phillip—is renowned for its strong commitment to maintaining a socially inclusive and tolerant harm reduction approach towards these groups.[4]

A number of commentators have suggested that the ALP only holds Melbourne Ports because of the sitting member Michael Danby's strong personal following in the Jewish community. They point to two facts: that the Liberal Party's federal Senate vote for Melbourne Ports has been considerably higher than the ALP vote, and equally that the Liberal vote in the corresponding state electorates with large Jewish populations has also been much higher than that of the ALP. The implication of this analysis seems to be that if the Liberal Party preselected a Jewish candidate to neutralise Danby's Jewish support in a federal election, they might shift enough votes to win the seat.[5]

MICHAEL DANBY'S POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Fifty-two-year-old Michael Danby has been a long-time activist in the right-wing Labor Unity faction of the ALP, and within Jewish community politics. He first came to public attention in the mid 1970s when he led the successful Jewish student campaign against the extreme anti-Israel motions proposed by the radical left Australian Union of Students.[6] He subsequently worked as a researcher and lobbyist for the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies, and the private pro-Israel think tank, Australia-Israel Publications. He also held staffer positions with ALP federal ministers Barry Cohen and Allan Griffiths, worked for the Shop Assistants' Union, and was the unsuccessful ALP candidate for the safe Liberal Party seat of Goldstein in the 1990 federal election.[7]

Danby attained pre-selection for the seat of Melbourne Ports in 1998 and was subsequently elected. He is colloquially referred to as the 'Member for the Jews' due to his vigorous support of the State of Israel. During the 2001 election campaign, for example, he published an advertisement in the *Australian Jewish News* which stated 'Support Israel, Vote 1 Danby'. Danby has also defended Israel in Parliament on a number of occasions against attacks from members of his own Party such as Julia Irwin and Tania Plibersek.[8] Nevertheless, Danby argues that his agenda goes well beyond specifically Jewish issues, and has cited his strong support for human rights in China/Tibet, and his activism on child care, education, and income security.[9]

ADAM HELD'S BACKGROUND

Adam Held, a 45-year-old lawyer, was announced as the Liberal Party candidate for Melbourne Ports in February 2007. Held has been active in a number of Jewish religious and cultural groups including the Melbourne University Jewish Students'

Society, Magen David Adom and the Caulfield Hebrew Congregation. He is also a former mayor of the City of Stonnington from 1997–98, a highly affluent area which mainly borders the seat of Melbourne Ports sharing the booth of Domain in common.[10]

On receiving pre-selection, Held made reference to a number of issues including the economic success of the Howard Government, and his family's experience in small business. Held described himself as a 'social moderate with an interest in environmental issues', but appeared keen to promote himself as a pro-Howard loyalist. He cited businessman Richard Pratt and former Liberal Party Premier Jeff Kennett as sources of inspiration, and promised to improve the safety of the local community by 'cracking down on hoons and vandals'.[11]

In contrast to Danby, Held had only limited political experience or profile either inside or outside the Jewish community. On the surface, it appeared that he had been chosen primarily because of his Jewish background, and the hope that he would reduce Danby's support within the Jewish section of the Melbourne Ports electorate.

IS THERE A UNIFIED JEWISH VOTE?

It has sometimes been suggested that Jews as a community exert a disproportionate influence on Australian politics.[12] This argument persists despite the fact that Jews comprise a tiny percentage (about 0.5) of the overall population estimated at 105,000–112,000 persons,[13] and constitute more than five per cent of voters in only four federal seats: Wentworth, Melbourne Ports, Bradfield and Goldstein.

The notion of disproportionate Jewish influence seems to be based on the assumption that Jews vote with a united voice. However, the evidence suggests that Jews are only united on the questions of Israel and anti-Semitism. Given that anti-Semitism is marginal in Australian society and that both major parties have provided bipartisan support for Israel for at least the last 25 years, these variables have rarely come into play. The limited data available suggest that a clear majority of Jews have supported the Liberal/National Party Coalition since the mid 1970s due to a range of political, cultural, religious, social and economic factors.[14] But on average, a higher number of Jews who are affluent appear to vote Labor or Green than would be the case in the rest of the population.

This complexity reflects the fact that on broader socio-economic issues Jews are as divided as any other group. Australian Jewry is an affluent community with a disproportionate number of ultra-wealthy individuals and families. The majority of Australian Jews have incomes well above the national average—$61,400 compared to $39,000 per annum—and many Jews vote for the Coalition because they prefer their policies on economics, taxation, industrial relations and the US alliance.

But conversely, more than 27 per cent of Jewish households live on less than $32,000 per annum,[15] and this group may prefer Labor or Greens policies such as the abolition of Work Choices, and additional funding for public education, health, child care and housing. In addition, relatively few Jews are social conservatives concerned with symbolic issues such as the monarchy, abortion, and the traditional family. Many Jews, irrespective of socio-economic status, seem to hold liberal attitudes on social issues such as refugees, multiculturalism, indigenous welfare, illicit drugs, gay rights and climate change. There is strong Jewish opposition to government immigration policies—such as the recent Howard Government announcement reducing the intake of African refugees—which appear to discriminate on the grounds of religion or race.

THE DEBATE WITHIN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Both Danby and Held waged intense campaigns within the Jewish community, particularly around the issues of support for the State of Israel and funding for Jewish schools. Most Australian Jews see support for Zionism and Israel as a fundamental component of their Jewish identity.[16] In addition, a significant majority of Jewish students, estimated at 77 per cent, attend non-government schools, with 62 per cent attending Jewish day schools.[17] Consequently, there was considerable concern within the Jewish community over funding proposals for Jewish schools. Conversely, the parents of the approximately 23 per cent of Jewish students who attend government schools may have held different concerns, but little media reference was made to their concerns about school fees or funding.

The specifically Jewish debate in Melbourne Ports loomed large in the pages of the *Australian Jewish News* (AJN), the weekly Jewish newspaper which is published in separate editions in Melbourne and Sydney (albeit with considerable overlap). Under the editorship of Ashley Browne and previously Dan Goldberg, the AJN has become not only a reporter of news, but also arguably a political player in itself.[18]

The AJN not only reported and editorialised on the Melbourne Ports battle, but also actively intervened in the debate by publishing provocative articles and editorials. Despite this, the paper was careful to maintain its party political neutrality, and emphasise that it was 'not taking sides in the election'.[19] Equally, the candidates used the AJN as their prime forum for appeals to Jewish supporters. During the period from August to November 2007, the AJN Melbourne edition published a significant number of paid advertisements (totaling eight) from the two candidates, and a large number of letters to the editor from supporters of the two candidates.

During the 2004 election, the Liberal candidate, Southwick, had attempted with some success to apply wedge tactics to his opponent by suggesting that Danby (despite his own unchallengeable pro-Israel record) had failed to effectively challenge anti-Israel sentiments within the ALP. However, Danby was more pro-active in 2007, and was arguably able to outdo the Liberals by promoting Kevin Rudd's strong pro-Israel credentials.[20] In October 2007, Rudd proposed to put Iran's president on trial at the International Court of Justice for making genocidal threats against Israel. This proposal was highly popular in the Jewish community and over 10,000 people signed a petition in support. However, it was dismissed as unrealistic by Coalition Foreign Minister Alexander Downer.[21]

Danby also launched an attack on the Australian Greens who are considered by many Jews to be unduly critical of Israel.[22] He claimed that the Liberals were preferencing the 'anti-Israel' Greens, and urged voters to support the Labor candidate, David Feeney, ahead of the Greens for the sixth Victorian Senate spot.[23] In response, the Liberals accused Danby of deceiving the Jewish community, and argued that the ALP were actually preferencing the Greens ahead of the Liberals in both houses of Parliament.[24]

Held also attempted to demonstrate his pro-Israel credentials. He described himself as a 'proud Zionist', and attacked the views of the Independent Australian Jewish Voices, a group led by journalist Antony Loewenstein which has been highly critical of the State of Israel.[25] He also made numerous attempts to suggest that the ALP was afflicted by anti-Israel campaigners. For example, he condemned the listing of a pro-Palestinian forum on the fringe program of the ALP National Conference,[26]

and attacked the ALP for allegedly refusing to support Israel's security fence.[27] He also emphasised the long-standing friendship of the Prime Minister, John Howard, with Israel and the Jewish community.[28] Other Liberal Party figures including the Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator David Johnston, and former Melbourne Ports candidate, David Southwick, also stressed the party's strong support for Israel, and implied that Labor was less sympathetic to Israel.[29]

This debate arguably ended in a draw with the AJN concluding that 'Kevin Rudd has made all the right noises on Israel', and that 'Labor is clearly a genuine friend of our community and Israel'.[30]

The debate over schools funding was equally polarised, and turned into something of a bidding war between the two parties. In the 2004 election, the Liberal Party enjoyed some success in painting Labor's needs-based funding model for private schools as hostile to Jewish schools.[31] However, the ALP's 2007 policy appeared to be more favourable to Jewish concerns. Labor made a $20 million commitment in extra funds (plus tax deductibility) to support the special security needs of Jewish schools, and also promised to invest $16 million in additional recurrent money for less affluent Jewish day schools. In the view of the Jewish community, these schools have not received equitable funding under the Socio-Economic Status (SES) funding formula of the Howard Government due to the disparity between the high socio-economic status of their location and the lower financial capacity of the parents whose children attend these schools.

In contrast, the Liberals only agreed to provide tax deductibility for security costs borne by the Jewish community, and suggested that Jewish concerns about SES funding anomalies would be favourably considered under a new appeals process.[32]

The AJN concluded that Labor had 'trumped the Liberals'.[33]

Both candidates used the services of prominent party figures to boost their campaigns. Held took Education Minister, Julie Bishop, on a visit to Jewish schools. He also employed Alexander Downer, Philip Ruddock, Brendan Nelson, and Senator David Johnston. Danby brought in Shadow Ministers Nicola Roxon and Jan McLucas, as well as Education spokesperson Stephen Smith, who toured Jewish schools, and the Shadow Minister for Communications and Information Technology, Senator Stephen Conroy, who spoke to a private gathering hosted by the State Zionist Council of Victoria.

Some dirty tricks also took place. Numerous campaign posters belonging to both Michael Danby and Adam Held were either stolen or vandalised.[34] The AJN jovially labeled the campaign 'the battle of the signs'.[35]

THE OUTCOME

The overall Melbourne Ports vote revealed significant change from the 2004 election. The Labor primary vote increased by 3.24 per cent to 42.49 per cent, and the Liberal primary vote dropped by 3.25 per cent to 39.69 per cent. The Greens vote increased only marginally by 0.9 per cent to 15 per cent, but was still the third highest Greens primary vote in Victoria. With the assistance of approximately 70 to 80 per cent of Greens preferences, Danby was able to comfortably hold the seat with a two-party-preferred vote of 57.08 per cent (up 3.34 per cent) compared to 42.92 per cent for Adam Held (down 3.34 per cent).[36] This result is, however, lower than the national swing to Labor of 5.62 per cent and the Melbourne metropolitan swing of 4.53 per cent. But that comparison only tells part of the story.

The ALP won 27 of the 34 booths in Melbourne Ports compared to 24 of the 35

booths in 2004. But what was most significant was the large increase in the ALP vote in the most heavily Jewish populated areas of the electorate. For example, the ALP secured a swing of 7.82 in Caulfield North, and swings of more than 4.8 per cent in four of the other seven Caulfield-based booths. The ALP also scored a swing of 13.01 per cent at the Montefiore Homes for the Jewish elderly—designated as Special Hospital Team 1. In addition, the postal vote (likely to consist disproportionately of Orthodox Jews who are unable to vote on a Saturday) swung by 4.4 per cent in the ALP's favour.

This outcome suggests the following conclusions. First, The Melbourne Ports result confirms the findings of all surveys over the last two decades that most Australian Jews are likely to vote for the Coalition.[37] Despite Danby's significant gains, the Liberals still won a clear majority of the vote in six of the nine key Jewish booths. It is also significant that the two-party-preferred swings to Labor in two of the other seats with significant numbers of Jewish voters —Bradfield (4.10 per cent) and Goldstein (3.98 per cent)—were smaller than the national average, and that Malcolm Turnbull actually gained votes (1.32 per cent) in Wentworth.

Second, despite this (as noted above), Michael Danby secured major swings in most of the key Jewish voting booths. This suggests that his personal vote significantly reduced the gap in Jewish support for the two major parties in Melbourne Ports. His relative success contrasts strongly with both the Labor Senate vote in Melbourne Ports, and the Labor vote in the corresponding booths in the last state election. The ALP only scored 32.16 in the Senate compared to 40.80 for the Coalition,[38] and the Liberal State member for Caulfield, Helen Shardey,

easily outpolled her Labor opponent in six of the seven Caulfield voting booths.[39] To be sure, other factors may also have influenced the low Labor Senate vote in Melbourne Ports, including the presence of many people following an alternative lifestyle who chose to vote Labor in the Lower House and Greens or Democrat in the Senate, and Labor's choice of the socially conservative Jacinta Collins as their lead Senate candidate who would definitely not have appealed to this group of voters.

Third, there is a Jewish voting bloc in Melbourne Ports, but it is not unified on any issue other than support for the State of Israel. Given the strong pro-Israel records of both the ALP leader, Kevin Rudd, and the sitting member, Michael Danby, this issue was successfully neutralised in this election. Many Jews appear to have swung to Labor because they concluded that there was bipartisan support for Israel, and hence felt safe to vote on a range of other socio-economic issues.

Fourth, the Liberal Party is unlikely to win Melbourne Ports whilst the combined ALP/Greens primary vote remains well over 50 per cent (currently 57.49 per cent compared to 39.69 for the Liberal Party). The Liberal Party might have more success if they chose a candidate who was willing to engage with the socially progressive views of the electorate and adopt independent positions (if necessary at odds with official Liberal Party policy) on the environment, same-sex marriage, and other social issues such as illicit drugs.[40]

Fifth, conversely if Labor were to pre-select a candidate other than Michael Danby who was less sympathetic to Jewish concerns, including particularly Israel, this would place a significant proportion of their existing vote in the Jewish community at risk and could cost them the seat.

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