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## "We Are Next!": Listening to Jewish Voices in a Multicultural Country

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### "We Are Next!": Listening to Jewish Voices in a Multicultural Country

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#### Abstract

"Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they are not out to get you." (unattributed, multiply-claimed)

"What does it matter what the crackpots believe? It matters to the extent that others come to believe them." (Daniel Patrick Moynihan)

If the notion of being at home in one's country is safe and reassuring, the homeland and the heartland of what we judge important, then the thought that a country needs its own homeland security is destined to create a sense of unease. Australia's homeland security unit was set up in May 2003 (Riley), just weeks after the allies' Coalition of the Willing had celebrated George W Bush's declaration aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, of 'Victory in Iraq' (BBC). It might have been expected, in this victorious glow, that the country would feel confidently able to return to a state of security. Apparently however – if paradoxically – it is only necessary to set up a department of Homeland Security when a country feels insecure. In a country of insecurity – and the dimensions of that insecurity were to be researched and teased out over the months and years to come – there are likely to be some people who feel more or less secure. What might the reasons be for people to feel fearful in their own country?

The discourse of terrorism has created and revealed significant divisions in Australian society, apparently unequalled since the Vietnam draft (if the size of the public protests before the 2003 Iraq War, and the polarisation of opinion since, is a gauge). At a time when the 'imagined nation' (Anderson) becomes more conflicted and less accessible as a result of such division and fear, a number of publications have concentrated upon the impacts of this changed national environment on Australia's Muslim communities. Some commentators have identified threats to the conception of Australia as a welcoming country which embraces a multi-cultural vision of itself (Poynting and Noble; Manning 'Arabic and Muslim people in Sydney's daily newspapers'). Clearly, in all this insecurity, the discourse of terrorism has directly impacted upon Australian perceptions of *Australian* others – and Australian *constructions* of Australian others – as well as upon perceptions of those others beyond the country's borders.

While attention has been paid elsewhere (Aly and Green '*Moderate Islam*') to the binary perspectives of audience members who fear Bush's global policies, and audience members who fear the actions and motives of the non-Western other (typically the 'Islamic fundamentalist'); further narratives of country, belonging and security are also circulating. These stories may have less purchase in popular discourse simply because there is no 'news hook' upon which to hang them – or paradoxically as we discuss below, the news is 'old news' and is thus not considered newsworthy or dramatic enough. However, when researchers become aware of such discourses it becomes important to ask why some stories are hidden from view. Specifically, this paper pays attention to the fact that a national survey of levels of fear, comparing broader community Australians with Australian Muslims, found unexpectedly that the group which recorded the highest fear levels of all was the small number of people identifying themselves as Australian Jews. While the finding was from a sample of only 7 respondents, and while a cell size such as this is in line with acceptable statistical expectations for a sample of 573 (see below), another 63 people identifying as Jewish voluntarily contacted the research team when they heard about the survey, with the aim of expressing their views. A further eighteen people, expressing extreme anti-Semitic sentiments, also voluntarily contacted the team. Thus of the 92 public callers to Mark Balnaves, the Chief Investigator who was the contact point for responses to the survey, 81 constructed Jewishness and Jewish identity as a relevant prompt for their comment.

In terms of the original project, 750 people were interviewed over the telephone and agreed to complete a survey assessing their levels of fear. The survey is reported elsewhere (Aly and Balnaves '*They want us to be afraid*'; Aly, Balnaves and Chalon). Of these 750 respondents, Australian Muslims were disproportionately sampled with 177 respondents identifying themselves in this way (although only 105 interviewees actually gave their faith as Islamic indicating that a significant proportion might have been secular, or non-practicing, Australian Muslims). This community was over-represented in order to obtain a statistically robust sample for analysing discourses of terrorism and the other. Thus the respondents who did not identify as Islamic represented 573 interviewees, and the 7 Jewish respondents constituted over 1% of these, which – given a proportion of secular and non-religious Jews – may tie in with the 0.4% of 2006 Census respondents giving their religion as Jewish (ABS). These small Jewish Census numbers have to be read with caution. It is not unusual for respondents to censuses who are fearful of possibly unpredictable futures to not disclose their religious or cultural affiliation. Nonetheless, this is clearly not a statistically-significant sample. It was to avoid such small numbers that the survey had been set up to over-sample Muslim respondents in terms of their proportional representation in the Australian population.

The proportion of respondents to the fear survey identifying with major religious groupings was:

Religion (Question 5)

	Frequency	Percent Valid	Percent Cumulative	Percent
Christian	466	62.1	62.1	62.1
Buddhist	13	1.7	1.7	63.9
Islamic	105	14.0	14.0	77.9
Jewish	7	.9	.9	78.8
Other - specify	37	4.9	4.9	83.7
None	118	15.7	15.7	99.5
Refused	4	.5	.5	100.0
Total	750	100.0	100.0	

While it was not self-evident prior to undertaking this research that Australian Muslims would necessarily present as more fearful than broader community Australians, this is in fact what happened. The results from Australian Jews and the overwhelmingly Jewish-focussed public responses to the survey, however, were totally unexpected by the researchers – none of whom is Jewish.

Green and Balnaves invited Bloustien, a cultural anthropologist, to join them in interrogating these issues around Jewish-ness in Australia. The authors started by exploring several related questions in this preliminary paper: firstly, whether these findings might be representative of a generalisable outcome and, if so, the factors which might explain it. Secondly, why these findings had been so unexpected to the researchers in a study of Australian community perceptions of fear: what clues might have been overlooked and why? Thirdly, how could we start to unravel the complex emotion of fear and understand what it means for different citizens and communities in contemporary Australia?

As indicated above, the majority of the 92 calls from Perth and interstate, enquiring about the survey while it was being conducted and when it had a high news profile, were from Jewish (63) and overtly anti-Semitic (18) members of the community. The latter were from those who insisted that it was the Jewish population that was responsible for the terror started on 9/11, thus tapping into one of the many conspiracy theories that circulate in the electronic and digital media:

In addition to causing massive loss of life, the attacks spawned a host of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that implicated the Jews and Israel in the bloodshed. As it turns out, those canards were not fleeting expressions of paranoid fantasy that dissipated once they were debunked. On the contrary, nearly five years later, the various 'Jews-did-it' scenarios emanating from the wreckage of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have proven stubbornly resilient. 'If anything, they're flourishing,' says Chip Berlet, senior analyst at Political Research Associates, a liberal think tank based in Somerville, Mass. (Greenberg)

The callers to the University would not have had to look very far to find what they took to be 'documentary proof' offered for Jewish perfidy. Anti-Semitic websites offer 'evidence' for a range of theories, including that there was an international Jewish conspiracy, with identified United States Senators as part of the conspiracy. Barkun argues that these anti-Semitic explanations represent a "closed system of ideas that is structured so that it is impossible to disprove" (Barkun; Pipes 'Conspiracy', 'Hidden hand').

The 81 Jewish-related calls from the community noted above do not count as a statistically representative probability sample of any defined sampling frame.

However, they highlight the fact that Jewish communities are a section of the Australian population who, historically, have an interest in shifts in public opinion that lead to social isolation. The first enquiry to Mark Balnaves following national publicity about the survey was from an elderly Australian Jewish Perth resident. He had heard about the survey from friends and was concerned that public opinion in Australia was turning against those who were perceived as different. His comment was "We are next!"

Although the kinds of fears expressed by members of Australia's Muslim communities have been discussed elsewhere (Exploding media myths), part of the genesis of that fear is located in the inability of some communities to see their experiences and perceptions reflected in mainstream media coverage. According to Noelle-Neumann ('Spiral of silence', 'Turbulences'), people who think they represent a minority view tend to keep quiet in public debates, whereas those who think they represent a majority point of view tend to make their views known. As most public debates are mass mediated (and are rarely conducted in solely interpersonal contexts in modern societies), most people have no way of finding out what the majority's thoughts are other than relying on news coverage and public opinion polls. People make judgements about whether they are in the majority or a minority concerning a specific issue and if they think they are in the minority, and the issue is important to them, they will often keep silent for fear of social isolation. Public opinion polls, interestingly, cannot for the most part pick up the spiral of silence because people are responding to their perceptions of what the majority think, or against the questions the pollster has put (Altheide; Fletcher; Foyle).

With the departure of the Howard Government 'fear' is not simply 'old news'. The elderly Jewish caller, afraid that his community was in trouble, may not be part of a 'representative statistical sample' but he certainly represents himself, as the other callers represented themselves. The fear survey was designed to elicit a fairly quick overview against a summative scale of people's sense of fearfulness within the community. In truth, the results should – in a country like Australia – show almost no-one perceiving themselves as fearful of living in our society.

Why might Jewish people particularly feel so fearful in their own country? In a rush to respond to changing perceptions of Australian Muslims in the aftermath of the Tampa incident (August 2001) and the 9/11 attacks on the US, studies such as Dunn and Mahtani's ('Media representations of ethnic minorities') indicated that more than two-thirds of those surveyed believed that humanity could be sorted into natural categories of race, with the majority feeling that Australia was "weakened" by people of different ethnic origins. While race, ethnicity and religion are all highly significant in terms of being different dimensions of an individual's identity, the indication from responses of those with particular religious affiliations, such as Jewish and Muslim Australians, is that when levels of fear increase, levels of security decrease. People who feel a 'sense of otherness' in these processes unite behind the identity which feels to them in most need of protecting (Aly and Green, 'Less than equal'). The impact is that the highly diverse ethnicities which might otherwise characterise Australian Muslims (with some 64 ethnicities and language groups [Lewis and Hassan]) are seen as less relevant in terms of an individual's identity than their over-arching cultural identification as Muslim.

So while studies of Australian fearfulness have understandably raised concerns over an 'Atmosphere of Terror' (Aly and Balnaves) among Australian Muslims, little attention has been paid to the effects of polarisation of the sense of home and country upon minority Australian communities not identifying with Islam. This finding that (a very small sample of) Australian Jewish respondents registered highly on the fear scale ties in with the discomforts indicated by Dunn and Mahtani's study, and a possibly generalised concern with the sense of a nation polarising around factors of ethnicity, culture and religion (rather than taking these for granted as everyday differences). In this respect it might be said that Australian Jews were equally concerned, along with Australian Muslims, but this is not necessarily so, and was certainly not what was indicated in the public responses to Mark Balnaves. The disproportionate response to the survey findings indicated that Australian Jews were highly concerned: possibly because the discussions were only in terms of Australian Muslims. Even though the media and commentary predominantly focused on Muslim identities, it seemed to be the case that people identifying with Judaism felt equally – or, possibly, even more – isolated than Muslims did.

### Accounting for the High Level of Fear Amongst Jewish Australians

Questions raised by the unexpected results and reactions to the survey are only surprising if one considers that the majority of people in Australia should feel safe, and that there is no reason for them to feel otherwise. That is, it is making an assumption that once people come to Australia they (can) leave behind their cultural backgrounds and align their fears and perceptions with those held by the majority. While many Jewish Australians are involved, very active, well-established and indeed celebrated members of their communities and professions, history has taught Jewish communities, possibly more than any other, that circumstances can alter rapidly. However well Jewish people considered they were assimilated, the past has shown that political climates can change – and in doing so can change that sense of security and sense of belonging over night. Even in democracies, public opinion can become suddenly negative and translate itself into legislation and repressive laws. Already in Australia the government lists Muslims it likes as 'moderate Muslims', with pointers as to how this should be identified (Aly and Green, 'Moderate Islam'). In Nazi Germany the legislation defined what constituted 'Aryan', while what was considered 'Jewish' was first defined then persecuted through harassment, torture and death (Friedlander 158). When particular communities experience such labelling inter-generationally and first hand, and suffer its outcomes, it is not surprising that many do not readily experience or express a secure sense of belonging, in old or new countries.

When considering the reasons for the high levels of fear expressed by the Jewish respondents and the later voluntary callers who identified as Jewish, it is relevant to acknowledge the ongoing existence and impact of anti-Semitism. Indeed, clear evidence of such anti-Semitism was also offered in the form of the 18 anti-Semitic calls made to Mark Balnaves by people who saw Jews and Jewish influences as being behind the 9/11 atrocities. We can address the impacts of anti-Semitism under two main headings:

- a) Self-perception: historical experience and contemporary experience;
- b) Framing as outsiders and labelling by others: discourses of difference.

#### Self-Perception: Historical Experience

Many if not most of the Jewish population in Australia – perhaps including the elderly caller whose comment is contained in the title of this paper – would be living survivors of (or descendants of) the Holocaust; or refugees from pogroms in other countries post Second World War. Persecution of Jewish populations did not start with Nazi Germany, nor did it stop at the end of the Second World War. In fact, some of the worst state-sanctioned examples of Jewish persecution occurred in Europe after 1945 (Geller; Stephen Roth Institute). UN Watch, a non-governmental organization based in Geneva and partly funded by US Jewish organisations, whose mandate is to monitor the performance of the United Nations, published a November 2007 report on the overall inaction (and indeed sometimes the complicity) of the UN on issues of anti-Semitism (UN Watch report). With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the wane of Communism's influence more generally, anti-Semitism in Europe has increased. This is partly because authoritarian Communist regimes tended to keep expressions of extreme nationalism and religious fervour in check (Urban).

While Jewish individuals and communities come to Australia believing that they have the opportunity for religious and cultural freedom in a welcoming and democratic country, previous experience has taught many to be wary. For some, anxiety is never far away, and is re-confirmed even in Australian daily life. For example, in the Stephen Roth Institute report on Australia, 765 reports of anti-Jewish violence, vandalism, harassment and intimidation were logged in 2007, represented the highest total since national record-keeping began in 1989. Such anti-Semitism does not seem to be restricted to right-wing groups as the report indicates:

Although the many small groups that comprise the Australian far left often make declarations critical of racism in all its forms, demonization of Israel is a common thread and the extremes of language used to condemn Zionism and Israel promote a mythology of a powerful, evil Jewish 'internationalism', almost indistinguishable from that depicted by the far right.

Whether such 'demonization' is straight-forwardly anti-Semitism – or whether it constitutes a more nuanced contribution to a wider anti-Imperialism (and sometimes anti-US) discourse which tends to oppose Israeli and Zionist policies with regards to Palestine – is not the issue here. It raises anxiety among Australian Jewish communities that becomes particularly acute when public discourses reiterating old stereotypes and exclusionary ideologies circulate through the media and the public sphere. Recent calls by the Anti-Defamation Commission for the Victorian police to tackle more robustly verbal and physical anti-Semitic attacks, were rejected on the grounds that the police believed the accounts of anti-Semitic attacks were exaggerated "to justify greater taxpayer-funded security measures," the implication being that if the Jewish community wanted greater security they should pay for it themselves (Kerbaj).

#### Self-Perception: Contemporary Experience

The notion of Jewish communities being under threat is not solely a perception, but the result of repeated direct experiences. These direct experiences are in the form of documented physical attacks on individuals and organisations (as recorded by The Stephen Roth Institute, for example). Individual high profile members of Jewish communities receive death threats; grave sites are vandalised, and buildings such as schools and synagogues are fire-bombed. Following the failure of the Oslo Accords (signed in 1993), the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada (2000) and then the attacks on the US on September 11 2001, violence aimed at Jewish people and property increased – in Australia and around the world:

In September 2000, the synagogue in Rosco Street in Bondi was attacked by arson while anti-Israel graffiti was daubed on the Illawarra Synagogue in Sydney's South. The Canberra Jewish centre was fire-bombed four times between September 2001 and September 2002. Individual Jews, particularly men wearing skullcaps, were physically attacked, while community leaders received death threats. Violence and Jew-hatred manifested themselves in the pro-Palestinian rallies of 2000 and 2001, with the burning of Israeli and US flags. Such outbursts created fear and anxiety amongst Australian Jewry and the wider community. (Rutland)

Attacks do not have to be physical to have the effect of raising anxiety in a smaller community and creating a sense of exclusion from the broader community. On 6 April 2002, an open letter was published in the *The Guardian* (Guardian, 'More pressure for Mid-East peace'). It called for an international boycott of all cultural and research links with Israel until the Israeli government was prepared to open "serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians, along the lines proposed in many peace plans including most recently that sponsored by the Saudis and the Arab League." That call was echoed in Australia, with a number of high profile Australian academics also calling for boycotts. These resolutions are part of an ongoing series which Julius and Dershowitz describe as "an act of violence, though of a paradoxical kind – one of recoil and expulsion rather than assault."

### Jewish Diasporic Identities

As with almost every cultural group apart from those living in their traditional lands, communities which identify as Jewish regard themselves as belonging to a (global) diaspora. That is, Australian (local) members of the Jewish diaspora consider they are "living away from the geographical region identified as the heartland of [their] cultural tradition" (Green 130). While Australia's Jewish community may feel themselves to be more or less well integrated within their host nation, the notion of diaspora functions as a discourse to construct the diasporic nation in ways analogous to Anderson's imagined community. Given (as we have suggested earlier) that people who perceive themselves as being 'othered' may band together to protect the identity which feels most threatened, it may not be surprising that some Australian Jews indicate an attenuated sense of security.

Friedman argues that "the processes that create the context in which identity is practiced constitute a global arena of potential identity formation" (117). Here he foregrounds the work of the individual subject in drawing upon a range of influences to construct personal histories which inform the practices of the self. Processes involved in identity formation include such socially-constructed parameters as age, gender, class, ethnicity, cultural context, sexual orientation and religious affiliation. Dayan argues that the construction of a diasporic identity balances discourses generated within the global diasporic community with those produced elsewhere – including discourses emanating from the local ('host') country which may be more or less positive. Identity creation is an ongoing individual activity which produces the individual subject through the negotiation of the range of alternative discourses. Some aspects of available discursive identities will be appropriated while others will be confronted or rejected. Within these contexts, people can be seen to practice a range of identities.

Dayan highlights the work of what he terms "particularistic media" in constituting a "micro public sphere" (103) which include physical and symbolic elements and understandings circulating among participants. These constructed understandings integrate the global identity in the context of a shared past. To such media can be added everyday practices – such as those of cooking and eating – and rite of passage rituals marking birth, coming of age, marriage and death. Relevant elements of material and social culture include newsletters, icons, photographs, travel, worship, meetings and greetings and web-based interactions – often consumed in a local context. The aim of particularistic media in a diasporic community, argues Dayan, "is not to create new identities but to prevent the death of existing ones" (110). In an environment where difference has been made problematic, engagement with such media and participation in such practices may increase the tension between the global and the local; and between the diaspora and the host nation of which they are a part and in which they live. This is not to presume the homogeneity of the Australian population, nor the uniformity of Australian Jews (who also form part of the culturally diverse wider Australia) – but it does indicate that both host and diaspora construct those who are 'othered' as engaging in specific practices through which the community may be identified. These practices include what Dayan refers to as the 'rediscovery' or 'reinvention' of tradition. They integrate the historic and global Jewish community over time and across space – differentiating that community from some dominant traditions of the local, Australian nation.

### Framing as Outsiders and Labelling by Others: Discourses of Difference

Possibly one of the greatest reasons for Australian Jewish communities' sense of unease and sense of being outsiders is the framing and labelling that occurs in popular discourses circulated in the media. Regular accounts of assumed Jewish political 'influence' and wealth have the effect of creating a fictionalised homogenised (caricaturised) Jewish identity at the expense of the real Australian citizen who also happens to be Jewish. While the possession of influence and wealth is undoubtedly true for many Australians from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the kind of labels to which Jewish Australians are subjected include the circulation of published virulent anti-Semitic literature (for example 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', a forgery that claims to describe a secret Jewish conspiracy for world domination which is still promoted and offered as evidence supporting anti-Semitism in many countries today: Jacobs and Weitzman).

The lack of knowledge by the wider Australian community about the diversity and nature of Jewish culture, and perceived misunderstandings about Israeli society, impact on how Jewish Australian citizens can feel 'othered' in their everyday social encounters. Most non-Jewish Australians do not realise the breadth of ethnic backgrounds that are incorporated under the umbrella of Jewish culture. Across Australia, while Jewish communities frequently self-identify as coming from Ashkenazi (originally German speaking) or Sephardic (originally Spanish speaking) backgrounds, these definitions themselves fail to record the diversity of communities from Hungary, Poland, Russia, Eastern Europe, France, Italy, North Africa, Turkey, Asia Minor, the Netherlands, England, North and South America, Germany, Denmark, Austria, Hungary, Yemen, Egypt, Iraq, Spain, Portugal, South Africa, India, the US, Israel and more recently arrived Ethiopian Jewry, as well as those people who through intermarriage and conversion originate from far East Asia. Within these mixed populations are communities which identify with particular religious traditions such as Hassidic, Orthodox, Progressive, Reform, Re-constructionist and also those who consider themselves secular but who still identify with Jewish culture and tradition. As demonstrated in the research with Australian Muslims (Aly and Green, 'Less than equal'), the complexity of what lies behind the simplicity of labels is important as we consider why some groups are far more fearful than others in Australia.

### The Role of the Media in Framing the 'Other'

In their report of the classic Project Revere study, DeFleur and Larsen ('The flow of information') show that as *stimulus intensity* – the repetition of a message – increases, the proportion of people who get the information will also increase but not in direct proportion to the increasing number of repetitions. Doubling the number of repetitions does not translate to doubling the number of people in the know. Arguably, stimulus intensity also affects the half-life of information and knowledge – lessons learned painfully, and often, become deeply ingrained and it may be hard to move on from these; even given a change of country, a new start, or even a new generation.

We are aware that perceptions of risk are firmly linked to bio-social markers. Lupton and Tulloch ('Risk is part of your life') point to the growing body of sociological research that investigates ways in which people respond to risk and identified that factors such as "gender, age and sexual identity [were implicated] in structuring risk perceptions". The notion that historical experiences can heighten a sense of risk for an Australian community in the present, in the absence of specific drivers for this, is significant since many cultural studies approaches to dealing with contemporary political issues may not fully acknowledge the creation of new understandings through the integration of news and information with existing historical and cultural knowledges shared within the diasporic community.

Cultivation theory (Shanahan and Morgan) can explain some aspects of the phenomenon of pervasive fear, as do Cohen's theories about moral panics. What we tell ourselves about the causes, consequences and cures of fear constitutes a significant proportion of the media product currently consumed by Australian audiences. Popular culture examples of this discourse of fear include Channel 7's ratings leader *Border Security*, "Australia's frontline" in the quest for a secure homeland. To a diasporic community which constructs itself as having a particular experience of isolation and exclusion – whether in Australia or abroad – continual media repetition of the fear motif would be an invitation to a spiral of concern.

In Western democracies like Australia the mass media have considerable freedom accorded to them in the expectation that they will both diffuse political information and act as watchdogs on the custodians of the body politic – governments, departments, institutions and the like. At the same time, formal attempts to build reassurance ('Alert but not alarmed') may backfire. Aldoory, for example, found that government messages of reassurance have often failed because the context in which those messages are to be received is poorly understood at a sub-cultural level. While most of the work on diffusion of information focuses either on 'mass media' environments or on 'interpersonal' contexts, few studies have explored the intersection of both and how adoption and diffusion relate to democratic processes (Balnaves et al; Goot; Manning, 'Voting behaviour'). Clearly, however, the processes by which information is adopted and diffused have an important effect on how public opinion is formed within communities. In the Australian context, an understandable recent research focus on Australian Muslims should not obscure the relevance of pervasive fears which deeply concern Australian Jews. While it is precipitate to suggest ways to address this fear at present, acknowledging and regretting its existence is a small first step.

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