

World Middle East [Antisemitism](#)

## OPINION

# *Australia 2024 is nothing like Germany 1933. And yet...*



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February 15, 2024 – 11.30am



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For 17 years, I immersed myself in the maelstrom that is encapsulated in that loaded word, antisemitism.

I was chief executive of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, and it came with the territory – a space which encompassed a history of pogroms and persecution, discrimination and race hatred, culminating in that darkest moment that is also encapsulated in a single word, the Holocaust.

There was the episode which saw a [Jewish student studying to become a motor mechanic suffer racial abuse](#) from classmates for two years. Appeals to his superiors for redress were fruitless, leading to his being advised to find another campus. The eventual outcome was that the inspirational chief executive devised a 10-point anti-bigotry protocol for the college and the student was able to complete his studies.



Neo-Nazis at anti-immigration protests in Melbourne last May JUSTIN MCMANUS

There was the incident when students at a private girls' school posted images of themselves, arms spread-eagled to depict a swastika. The photograph was accompanied by messages which included "It's time to burn the Jews" and "It's time to gas the Jews". To the credit of the school, it responded proactively and measures were put in place which were at once remedial, educational and rehabilitational, as well as punitive.

Then there was the sermon in which a priest described Jews as "a jealous people". Challenged later as to how a message that denigrated Jews accorded with the church's ethos of social inclusion, the priest doubled down. He was referring to Jews at the time of Jesus, he explained, seemingly assuming his audience would draw a line in the sand between Jews then and now and intuitively understand that today's Jews do not warrant the slur.

Nor can one overlook the bizarre conclusion to a soccer match between a Jewish Under-20 team and a suburban side when an opposition player dropped his shorts, displayed his buttocks and yelled, "Wipe my a--- with your Jew hat!"

The incidents were endless, emanating from every corner of civil society. Yet, the range of circumstances notwithstanding, one common denominator underpinned them all: the critical factor in determining whether positive outcomes were feasible was leadership. Or lack thereof.



A ute with the registration 88SIEG has been spotted in Sydney. “Sieg” is German for “victory”, while H is the eighth letter of the alphabet; so 88 is code for HH, meaning “Heil Hitler”.

Which segues to the dire situation affecting Jewish Australians today. The plethora of professionals and personalities, politicians and preachers who have added their particular brand of prejudice to the hate-filled anti-Jewish momentum defies reason.

Racist epithets which were previously whispered are trumpeted brazenly. Massive signs daubed in pink outside a [Melbourne apartment block](#) declaring “Kill Jews” and “Jew lives here”. A ute spotted on the Anzac Bridge with the registration 88SIEG, “sieg” being German for “victory”, while H is the eighth letter of the alphabet; so 88 is code for HH, meaning “Heil Hitler”.

NSW Greens MP Jenny Leong takes issue with the “Jewish lobby” for “infiltrating ... ethnic community groups”. She invoked grotesque imagery (for which she subsequently issued what [she says is an apology](#)).

And the hit-lists: sinister dissemination of hundreds of names and details of Jewish artists, academics and others so that they could be hounded, vilified,

have their businesses boycotted, their children's details published and even targeted with death threats.

All this, appallingly, in a country which has been home to thousands of Holocaust survivors, to a community which saw six million Jews murdered, with the inclusion of their names on lists a fundamental aspect of how the Nazis identified them, rounded them up and then shot or gassed them. It's also a country which celebrates multiculturalism, which has been home to Jews since the First Fleet, which has seen Jews serve as head of the Australian Defence Force, as governor-general and on government front benches.

Australia 2024 is not Germany 1933. Yet for Jews born after the Holocaust, the tsunami of anti-Jewish hatred sweeping our nation is the most all-pervasive and terrifying in our lives and, in fact, in our country's history. And it continues to spiral. Social cohesion is fracturing. That alleged multicultural success is being tested like never before.

As evidenced in the slew of unsavoury incidents cited above, there is a desperate need for leadership at the highest levels. Right now. Throughout public life. From leaders of government, industries, faith communities, business, the arts, every facet of civil society. Without it, the disintegration that is jeopardising the social fabric of this country can only worsen. Our nation depends on it.

**Vic Alhadeff is a former chief executive of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies.**



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