

Statement

Hon Jacinta Allan MP
Premier



Tuesday, 17 December 2024

PREMIER'S SPEECH ON SOCIAL COHESION

Excerpt of Premier's remarks in Melbourne today, with Minister for Police Anthony Carbines and Minister for Multicultural Affairs Ingrid Stitt.

Modern, multicultural Victoria is built on a simple promise:

Whoever you are, whoever you pray to – you're safe and welcome here in this state.

Last week I met with and spoke to literally hundreds of members and leaders of the Jewish community, and I listened.

What's clear is Jews increasingly feel that simple promise of modern, multicultural Victoria is being denied them.

How else you describe a real and demonstrated increase in reports of antisemitic incidents?

How else to describe a tendency for extreme, dangerous and radical protest that is allowing antisemitism and hate to thrive within it?

How else to describe protests that have targeted – of all things – a people's place of worship?

How else to describe two despicable words that greeted school kids at Mount Scopus?

How else to describe the small but menacing acts of intimidation at a local level – to which community feel powerless to quickly escalate and respond?

And how else to describe a synagogue going up in flames in the middle of the night – in an act of terror – while people were quietly studying and praying inside?

This is simply unacceptable in our modern, multicultural state.

Today, the Government of Victoria renews its promise to Jews – and to everyone of any background:

Whoever you are, whoever you pray to – you deserve to be safe and welcome here in this state.

And today, we will support that promise with strong action to fight hate and help Victoria heal.

Allow me to outline that plan.

1.

We are setting a standard.

We do not tolerate anti-semitism, full stop.

Just as we do not tolerate any form of hate, racism, discrimination, against a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Sikh, a Hindu or Chinese Victorian, against a woman, against a gay, lesbian or trans person.

It's all despicable. All racism is wrong. All racism is evil, hateful – corrosive.

Media contact: Bodil Droga 0413 701 929 | bodil.droga@minstaff.vic.gov.au

And antisemitism *is* racism.

There are too many who want to qualify antisemitism or make excuses for it.

I want to make it absolutely clear: I never will.

2.

We have had enough of the protests that have caused division and disruption in our streets.

Peaceful protests can and must be protected in this state.

Protests that harms others cannot.

Victorians have witnessed extreme, dangerous and radical conduct in numerous public demonstrations over the last year.

It would be wrong for me to say that everyone at these protests is anti-Semitic.

But we know some are, and they are showing it.

And we know hate and antisemitism absolutely thrive in these environments.

So we're going to give more powers to police weed out and stamp out the influence of extreme and radical participants in public protests.

We will ban the flags and symbols of listed terrorist organisations in public.

That includes Hamas, Hezbollah and several other groups, including white nationalist and racist violent extremist right-wing groups.

We will also ban the use of face masks and balaclavas at protests.

We know they are being used to conceal identities and shield agitators from crowd-control measures like capsicum spray.

Well, masks aren't a free pass to break the law.

There should be no place to hide in this state if you're a racist stirring up hate on the streets.

And we will also ban the use of glue, rope, chains, locks and other dangerous attachment devices that protestors use to cause maximum disruption and endanger others.

Those devices put people in harms' way and make it harder for police to do their job.

They make heroes out of morons.

This is what police have asked for. We are acting.

3.

We also have started to see more and more the targeting of places of worship as legitimate forms of peaceful protest.

We saw it outside Caulfield Shule.

We saw it at the Great Synagogue of Sydney.

We saw it at Central Shule.

Media contact: Bodil Droga 0413 701 929 | bodil.droga@minstaff.vic.gov.au

That's not peaceful protest – that's menacing behaviour.

And I must say, I'd hoped we had seen the last of it following the protests that targeted the Muslim community in my hometown of Bendigo – an incident that was rightly condemned, an incident that became the genesis of our Anti-Vilification Bill.

It's rearing its head again – and we will act.

We will legislate to protect the right of people to gather and pray, free from the fear, free from harassment and free from intimidation of protestors.

We will legislate to thwart protests and disturbance at shules, at temples, at churches, at mosques, at gurdwaras – and anywhere where Victorians are simply undertaking their fundamental rights of religious freedom.

Because that is a freedom that must be enjoyed by all in our multicultural state.

4.

Some people will stand at a platform like this and declare the multiculturalism as the problem.

No. In my Government's view, multiculturalism is the solution.

I sincerely believe the principles of multiculturalism – of understanding, of tolerance, of celebration – will help us repair the threads of social cohesion that have frayed in the past year.

And I believe our beloved multicultural and multifaith organisations can be our champions of cohesion – champions for a united Victoria.

That starts with the role we play in guiding and funding them.

We will introduce a 'social cohesion pledge' that multicultural organisations must observe to apply for government grants.

It'll be a simple, powerful and universal statement.

It won't be about any other country than our own.

And there'll be consequences if the pledge is broken.

We are also setting a big ambition – to restart multi-faith dialogue in Victoria.

It's been dormant here since last year amid the conflict overseas.

It will take a lot of work and a lot of faith to get that moving again.

Restarting that dialogue to help groups find areas of understanding and move through this challenging time – that's ultimately our way through this.

Finally, our own systems must be match fit.

So we commit to further work to make sure Victoria's multicultural policies, institutions and personnel are equipped to reject division, to build bridges and to resolve conflicts.

This includes work within the Victorian Multicultural Commission to ensure it can deliver this agenda – and I can announce that this work will be guided through the formation of a targeted advisory group.

I'm very proud to say it will be headed by an eminently qualified and respected Victorian – Mr George Lekakis AO.

George was the longest-ever serving Chair of the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

And we'll have more to say about that work soon.

5.

Finally – while we take bold action at a state level and welcome it at a federal level, we know we need to always liaise and listen at a local level.

Listening to community leaders, I know this means more regular communication, more updates back into the community, and also clear points of escalation to address and deal with concerns as they arise.

So we will form and chair a new body – a new working group – to help cut through systems and bureaucracy, understand the situation week-by-week, and get things done.

We could call it the *Local Escalation And Help* group – 'Leah' for short.

It could include representatives of Government Departments, council, Jewish community and rabbinical groups, security groups – but not politicians.

We will work with community leaders on the make-up of this small body and get Leah up and running as soon as possible.

Before I hand over to the Minister for Police, can I just finish by saying:

This is a long journey of reform.

It all builds on our Anti-Vilification and Social Cohesion Bill.

It builds on banning Nazi symbols and salutes.

It builds on making Holocaust education mandatory in schools.

It builds on Victoria's first anti-Racism strategy.

It builds on police powers to crack down on violent and unlawful protest.

And we need it.

I will never forget the sight and the smell of that blackened synagogue for the rest of my life.

I will never forget the harrowing stories of escape from that act of terror.

I will never forget how it made me think about my own childhood, growing up and attending church with my family.

Anti-semitism is a cancer.

We must leave no stone unturned to fight the evil of antisemitism, racism and hate in all its forms, to help heal our multicultural community – and to support a strong, united Victoria.

Media contact: Bodil Droga 0413 701 929 | bodil.droga@minstaff.vic.gov.au