

THE DARKEST PATH

The Puzzling Resilience of Antisemitism

2025 Acton Lecture

Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton

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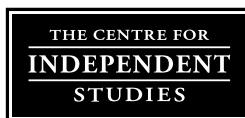
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Antisemitism

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Foreword

The annual Acton Lecture, presented by the Culture, Prosperity & Civil Society program at the Centre for Independent Studies, offers a platform for prominent individuals to reflect on contemporary issues of culture, faith and society as they arise in and confront Australia.

The 2025 Acton Lecture delivered by Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton, chief minister at the Great Synagogue in Sydney, turns to one of the most troubling issues to confront our society today: that of antisemitism. Resurgent antisemitism, including intimidating vandalism, has scarred our cities and shocked Australians, who have been alarmed at the violent eruption of the most ancient of hatreds in one of the most free and safe countries in the world.

When the CIS published my 2019 report *Toxic Mutation of an Ancient Hatred: Left-wing Antisemitism*, I noted that Australia was, at that time, thankfully free of the scourge of the kind of political antisemitism spouted by the postmodern left. All that changed after the Hamas invasion of Israel on 7 October 2023.

Suddenly, opposition to Israel's existence, framed as a moral imperative against colonialism and racism, was expressed openly with violence and menace, delegitimising Israel and vilifying any who expressed support for the Jewish state. And suddenly, Australian Jews — including school children, students and families going about their daily lives — no longer felt safe, and felt obliged to take precautions against being openly identified as Jewish.

While Australia does not have a deep history of antisemitism, evidence of its presence is now before our very eyes. Further, failure by political leaders to condemn antisemitism has threatened to normalise it in our society. The conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, particularly in left-wing political and activist circles, mirrors global trends and poses a significant challenge to social cohesion and the fight against racism in Australia.

In his timely Acton Lecture, Rabbi Elton, a leading Australian Jewish religious leader, brings his considerable training as an historian to explore the roots of this ancient hatred — and also to warn of the dangers that lie ahead for Australia if we fail effectively to combat it and expunge Jew-hatred from our shores.

Peter Kurti

Director – Culture, Prosperity & Civil Society program

I want to thank the Centre for Independent Studies and Peter Kurti for inviting me to give the 2025 Acton Lecture and to speak on antisemitism. It is very sad indeed that this is such a pressing topic in contemporary Australia. I particularly acknowledge Jillian Segal AO, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism and applaud the work she has been doing. The task is certainly a great one; with at least a fourfold increase in antisemitic incidents in Australia in the past 18 months, with synagogues, schools, daycares, homes and cars all being vandalised — even torched — students intimidated, and members of the Jewish community doxed.

Australia's future as a peaceful and harmonious society depends on how we respond to this crisis. That 'we' must include all Australians which is why it is so encouraging that this lecture takes place under the auspices of an institution concerned with the whole of Australian civic culture, and not just the Jewish community.

This lecture is named for Lord Acton, who is best known for saying, quite rightly, "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." He was a consistent advocate for personal freedom, a Liberal Member of the House of Commons and then the House of Lords and an outspoken supporter of Home Rule for Ireland. Acton was a striking mixture of insider and outsider. He was the son of a baronet but also a Catholic who was barred from entering Cambridge University as a student, although he later became Regius Professor of History there. He remained a loyal Catholic but also intellectually independent of the church hierarchy for his whole life. As we look into the history of antisemitism to try to work out how we deal with it in the present and future, we can be well-guided by these words of Lord Acton:

The science of politics is the one science that is deposited by the streams of history, like the grains of gold in the sand of a river; and the knowledge of the past, the record of truths revealed by experience, is eminently practical, as an instrument of action and a power that goes to making the future.

I am a historian as well as a Rabbi, and I intend to look at this question — as Lord Acton recommends — through a historical lens, turning only to current events once I have built up the historical bedrock on which we stand. I will begin with a personal anecdote. In July 2022, I took my family to England and we visited the Tower of London. We saw the ravens and the Crown Jewels, and I also noticed an admirably frank informational sign stating: “King Edward I built St Thomas’s Tower as a grand river entrance and luxurious royal apartments in the late 1270s. The building work was partly funded by a heavy tax that Edward imposed on England’s Jewish community”. Those certainly were heavy taxes. Between 1219 and 1272, the English Crown imposed 49 levies on Jews, for a total of £300,000. To give a modern equivalent, that’s about half a billion pounds from a Jewish population of no more than 5000.

You will recall that by 2022 there was already an active movement to identify historic beneficiaries of the transatlantic slave trade, expose them, and hold them to account, for example, by encouraging them to make a financial contribution to addressing the legacy of slavery. That led, as an instance, to the Church of England, allocating £1 billion for that purpose. There had also been a spate of statue-toppling, tearing down images of men who had been active in the slave trade, most notably Edward Colston, whose statue was torn down in Bristol in 2020.

I am not convinced about the payment of money today, or the vigilante destruction of public property, but I am in favour of historical inquiry and transparency, and in that spirit I wrote to *The Guardian* with a proposal for an article: an audit into the medieval English institutions still functioning today that benefitted from money extorted from Jews in the 12th and 13th centuries. This included the Crown, of course, but also churches and cathedrals, Oxford and Cambridge colleges, the City of London, and so forth. This was not in a spirit of ‘whataboutery’ but in order to broaden our awareness of historic wrongs, which are still bringing material benefit today. I did not propose — and nor would I — tearing down the statues of notorious medieval antisemites, such as Edward I himself or Simon de Montfort, or renaming institutions honouring their memory such as De Montfort University in Leicester.

The Guardian did not even respond to my proposal.

I heard in that silence a meeting of medieval and modern attitudes towards Jews. In the times of Edward I and his predecessors there was deep hostility to Jews as religious anathema, who had rejected Jesus, who stubbornly continued to practice their religion. They became a resented minority, useful for certain purposes — largely financial — but mostly despised, ill-treated and when their utility ran out, eventually expelled. That medieval suffering is met with modern indifference, in the application of an unambiguous double standard. When it comes to Jews, a statute of limitations is applied in a way that is not done for other groups.

The enterprise dedicated to excavating the legacy of African slavery in the United States is called the 1619 Project, because that was the year the first enslaved Africans arrived in the colony of Virginia. It grew out of a *New York Times* initiative but now describes a much wider cultural and intellectual tendency. Many influential voices in contemporary academia and culture believe it is entirely appropriate to review events that happened over 400 years ago from a moral point of view. Yet, while events four centuries ago are seen as relevant to this activity, for some reason events seven and a half centuries ago are not. I cannot see the difference in principle between these two cases: enslaved Africans, and exploited and expelled Jews. In both cases, we know something about the people affected at the time, and we know who their cultural and communal descendants are. But the travails of one group from one period is considered a legitimate area of work, while the other is not; and the group that is not, is the Jews.

Of course, the issue is not really the passage of time. In the late 1980s, the Conservative government in Britain tried to pass a War Crimes Act to prosecute Nazi war criminals living in Britain. Twice the House of Lords rejected the Bill, and the House of Commons was only able to force it through using special constitutional powers. When those debates were taking place, people of the age I am today had lived through the Holocaust. For us today, it would refer to events of the late 1970s, yet it was considered by a majority of members of the

House of Lords to be too long ago. By any rational assessment this does not seem tenable. This phenomenon cannot be explained by counting the years.

Here is another example of a historic wrong against the Jews that is both un-righted and no-one seems interested in righting: the Lutheran Church, named after Martin Luther. He was a great theologian and possibly the most influential figure of the 16th century, but he also said “be on your guard against the Jews, knowing that wherever they have their synagogues is found but a den of devils in which sheer self-glory, conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming of God and men are practiced most maliciously”. He not only assaulted Jews with his words, he urged violence against them, and was greatly influential in encouraging those acts to be carried out in Germany and elsewhere after his death, including in the Holocaust. And yet 77 million Christians today accept the name of Lutheran and honour the name of Luther. That seems not just anomalous but disturbing, and calls out for explanation.

If we turn from religion to culture, we find a similar selective myopia. I saw recently Danni Scott, a reporter for Metro Entertainment argue that “signing on to the new HBO series (or any other Potter project for that matter) [as an actor] is an endorsement of its creator — JK Rowling — and what I consider to be her bigoted and transphobic views”. Scott declared “I won’t forgive any actor who joins the Harry Potter TV series”. This is a clear call for cancelling actors who will play a role in a television series, based on books written by a person they regard as transphobic.

Now let’s take another case. Roald Dahl was a very popular author, especially for children. He was also a well-known antisemite who told the *New Statesman* in 1983, “there’s a trait in the Jewish character that does provoke animosity, maybe it’s a kind of lack of generosity towards non-Jews. I mean there is always a reason why anti-anything crops up anywhere; even a stinker like Hitler didn’t just pick on them for no reason”. Nevertheless, adaptations of Dahl’s works continue to pour out, and *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*, released in 2023, with a star-studded cast, even has Ralph Fiennes playing Dahl himself. The

unapologetic, explicit antisemitic author is himself portrayed without any comment at all. Indeed, the film has a 97% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes. We cannot miss the double standard.

We can examine a comparison closer to home. At public events, including at my synagogue, we are reminded that we are meeting on Gadigal land, and I support that practice. We often hear the phrase “this is, was and always will be Aboriginal land; sovereignty was never ceded”. I have much sympathy with that point of view. When Europeans arrived here in the late 18th century they may have been as many as 4000 Gadigal people in the area around Port Jackson. The 1789 smallpox epidemic killed all but three. There may be around 100 Gadigal descendants on their original country today. The City of Sydney alone, has over 200,000 residents, and greater Sydney over five million. Yet, I acknowledge the Gadigal as the Indigenous people of this area and their right to be recognised as such, which is reflected in the current political and cultural convention. The displacement and near-total genocide of the Gadigal people, and many other indigenous peoples over 200 years ago is not relevant. They were here, they survived, and they are still here, and we are expected to respect that.

We can compare that to the attitude of many loud voices in our society, especially in its academic institutions, towards the place of Jews in the Land of Israel, roughly the area which constitutes the State of Israel, plus the West Bank and some other areas. There can be no reasonable doubt that the Jews are descended from the people who lived in that area until they were exiled by the Babylonians in 587 BCE and the Romans in 70 CE. We know that Jews living in the Land of Israel in the first century CE were forced to leave. These Jews and their descendants have always been aware of their exile from the Land of Israel, they have always prayed in the direction of Jerusalem and looked forward to their return there. As the medieval Hebrew poet Yehudah HaLevi wrote, “my heart is in the east and I am in the depths of the west”. Wherever a Jew may be, they are hoping to return to Jerusalem.

Not all Jews left under the Romans. At least a small remnant of Jews remained in the Land of Israel. They produced the Jerusalem Talmud,

which was completed in around 400 CE. Over the centuries, the Jewish population fluctuated as new communities were founded and then collapsed under the weight of persecution. Nevertheless, Jews from around the world never stopped trying to live in the Land of Israel. In pre-modernity, when all Jews were essentially religious Jews, this had a religious motivation — but even after some Jews became secular, the Zionist movement picked up the mantle and expressed the national desire of non-religious Jews to return to their homeland. When Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem, refers to “hatikvah shnot alpayim” — the hope of 2000 years — it is making a historical claim, and it is a fair one.

Yet some deny this Jewish indigeneity in the Land and Jewish connection to the Land, sometimes in dangerous ways. Last December, when the Pope inaugurated a series of nativity scenes in the Vatican, one depicted the baby Jesus lying on a keffiyeh, the scarf used by many Palestinians as a national symbol. The inference is clear: Jesus either was Palestinian, or today’s Palestinians embody the spirit of Jesus. This claim is not only wrong, it is disastrous. It erases Jesus’ Jewishness, and the ancient Jewish presence in the Land of Israel and it also reinstates the charge of deicide, the accusation that the Jews killed the incarnate God. When Jesus is presented as holy and defenceless, and in opposition to the world’s only Jewish state, then responsibility for his death is reapplied to Jews, both then and today. This is extraordinarily irresponsible. It is no wonder that the Vatican swiftly removed the scene, but it is remarkable that it was ever allowed to be installed in the first place. In the wake of two millennia of Christian antisemitism, it is extraordinary, bordering on the incomprehensible, that Vatican officials did not see the implication of this ‘Palestinian Jesus’. Perhaps to some extent they endorsed it

Among those who take a secular perspective, I have heard the objection that Jewish people cannot use an Iron Age myth that God promised a land to their ancestors to claim a right to that land today. But if these critics do not accept the bible’s account, then they are left with the academic consensus that the Israelites were an indigenous Canaanite tribe that came to dominate their small region, and only subsequently

created a mythic account of their origin. Either way, their descendants have a right to a presence, and self-rule, in the land. Zionism or the State of Israel cannot be a settler-colonial enterprise because an indigenous people cannot be settler-colonialists.

At the same time, we can fully accept, as I do, that other people came to live in the Land of Israel after 70 CE, and they too should be considered indigenous at this point. But the conflict cannot be fairly understood as between an indigenous people and a settler people, but two indigenous peoples, and they each have to be accommodated. To paint it in any other terms is to apply a double standard. Whether the dispossession took place 200 years ago, in the case of First Nations Australians, or 2000 years ago in the case of the Jews, makes no moral difference. And no one who gives a welcome to or acknowledgement of country can reasonably oppose the Zionist enterprise in principle — and if they do, we have to ask why there is this double standard, which we have now seen expressed in several different forms and contexts.

Where does this double standard originate? I suggest it is on deep foundations of antisemitic and anti-Jewish ideas and sentiments. In a 2023 lecture in Sydney, the scholar of antisemitism, Dr Dave Rich, shared a fascinating piece of research. In the late 1340s, Jews in German lands were blamed for spreading the Black Death by poisoning wells. Rich told us “In several towns in central Europe, Jews were arrested, expelled or burnt to death, with whole communities devastated ... The image of Jews as poisoners, either literally or metaphorically as a threat to the health of the nation, became fixed ... 600 years later, antisemitic violence and support for the Nazi party in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s was higher in towns and cities that had also seen anti-Jewish violence and repression during the Black Death.” This subterranean antisemitism may be invisible but it is powerfully present and it leads to the double standard in the west today.

A case in point is Rory Stewart, a former British diplomatic and politician, a Conservative, a Christian, and now a very popular commentator on public affairs. He also had a Jewish grandfather, has a Jewish wife and Jewish friends, including the liberal and secular

Israeli intellectual Yuval Noah Harari. I am sure he would be horrified, affronted and indignant to be called an antisemite, and I don't think he is one in a conventional sense — but there is something going on. I was a regular listener to his podcast with Alistair Campbell, *The Rest is Politics*, but I found myself unable to listen to it after 7 October 2023. I recently went back to listen again to his early comments after the Hamas attack. On 12 October, with all his Foreign Office and military background, he explained how the way Hamas were embedded in Gaza would make it very difficult for Israel to conduct military operations without significant civilian casualties. As many did, he compared the situation to the Battle of Mosul in 2016-17, when anti-ISIS forces attempted to retake the city, and largely destroyed it in the endeavour, killing around 10,000 civilians. During the Mosul campaign, Stewart was a minister in the British government, speaking out in support of the anti-ISIS offensive and stressing its importance.

Turning to late 2023, if anything, Stewart expected that Hamas tactics would make it even more difficult to avoid civilian casualties. We might expect, therefore, that Stewart would have a circumspect response to the war in Gaza as it got underway. Yet, as early as 20 October, less than two weeks after the Hamas atrocity, Stewart was comparing the 1300 killed in Israel and the 199 taken hostage with Hamas figures of 2750 dead in Gaza and 9700 injured, creating a sort of moral equivalence between the two sets of deaths. Empathy for Israel, and even the appreciation of the difficulties and complexities Israel faced, seemed to be draining away already, less than a fortnight after Hamas began the conflict. When Stewart actually saw Jews acting on a collective level in response to an attack upon them, he was repulsed by it.

By 15 February this year, with Hamas still holding dozens of Israeli hostages, alive or dead, but with a ceasefire already in place, Stewart was calling Israel's actions 'outrageous ... unforgivable ... ethnic cleaning, completely illegal'. He endorsed prosecution of Israel and its leaders in the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. In an ironic phrase he called the response of the west "double standards". Stewart went on to say "this is not the democratic Israel that people like Noah Yuval Harari stood up for ... this was never supposed

to be the vision of liberal Jews”. I thought that was very revealing. We see clearly the sorts of Jews, or Israelis, that Stewart approves of: people like his friend Harari, liberal secular Jews. As I have mentioned, Stewart himself is religious and conservative, but in his view Jews ought to be secular and liberal, who will not be too assertive, even in the wake of an event like 7 October. What caused this outpouring of outrage? It was Donald Trump’s idea to remove the Palestinian population of Gaza, but this is not a proposal that the government of Israel has endorsed, which raises the question: why was Stewart railing against Israel?

Let’s look further into Stewart’s statements connected with Jews. When Jeremy Corbyn was removed from the Labour Party for his attitude to antisemitism, Stewart declared “I think it’s disgusting that he was thrown out of the Labour Party”. His argument was that Corbyn “is a major figure who represents a very significant part of Labour history and heritage”. This was despite the fact that Stewart admitted that “there was horrifying antisemitism in Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party, I had friends who witnessed it directly and they expressed to me how disgusting it was. I absolutely believe it and it was a very good reason why people turned against Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party”. Nevertheless, for Stewart it was more important that “parties with serving MPs in Parliament should have broad coalitions” than a man who allowed antisemitism to flourish should be removed.

I was increasingly puzzled by Stewart’s approach until I saw his bad-tempered exchange on X with Vice President DJ Vance. The Vice President had argued that it was a “a very Christian concept” to “love your family and then you love your neighbour, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then after that, you can focus [on] and prioritize the rest of the world”. Stewart responded as a Christian, and there followed increasingly rude comments back and forth which arrived at Stewart making this statement: “Jesus’ love is universal ... this is what made Christianity so radical among tribal religions. When asked ‘who is my neighbour?’ Jesus chose a Samaritan — an outsider and theological enemy of the Jews — as the moral exemplar — to challenge the idea that obligation is primarily to one’s own people or community”. First,

Stewart is wrong on the facts. It is the Hebrew Bible that tells us 36 times to love the stranger. But my most fundamental question is ‘who are these tribal religions to which Christianity is morally superior?’ I assume he is not talking about indigenous Australians, Africans and Americans who encountered Christianity when the colonisers and missionaries arrived. Is Stewart really saying they were improved by the white man bringing the Gospel? I cannot imagine a centrist like Stewart making that argument. I think by ‘tribal’ he means the Jews and Judaism; he means me and my religion. This is classic, unreconstructed, Christian anti-Judaism. In his view, fostered by his British family, culture, education and institutions, from the military to the diplomatic service, perhaps the secret service, and the Conservative Party, we follow a primitive, angry and violent God, Jesus showed us a different way, but we have refused to take it.

Now Stewart’s other positions make sense. Western countries, Arab countries, can wage war — even with high civilian casualties — and that is the way of the world. Jews can do it in theory, but as soon as anything is done in practice, it is awful and outrageous and the international courts must step in. Jews should be secular and liberal and, dare I say it, turn the other cheek. Antisemitism is not a nice thing, but there are deemed to be more important matters to worry about, like a diversity of views within political parties, and Jews should just put up with it. Jews certainly may not respond on a collective level, like other people can, because Jews apparently have no right to a collective identity. Stewart and others complain about double standards. In fact, his is the double standard. He will not judge Jews on the same basis he judges other national groups.

Stewart is not alone in holding these attitudes; I think he merely surfaced a feeling that flows like a stream beneath Western society, and I think it explains a lot of what has gone on in the West and among Westerners since 7 October. The way that tens of thousands of protestors took to the streets to condemn Israel just a few days after the attack, when Israel had endured such a brutal assault but before it had taken any substantial action in response. The way that there are no similar demonstrations about events in Sudan, Yemen or China. The

way there were definitely no widespread demonstrations led by non-Jews demanding the release of the hostages; indeed, the demonstrations called for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, abandoning innocent men, women and tiny children. The way that we saw Holocaust denial in real time, as Westerners parroted Hamas propaganda that there hadn't been targeting of civilians on 7 October, even though Hamas themselves recorded and broadcast the evidence of those crimes. This moral inconsistency did not come from nowhere but is steeped in the anti-Jewish and antisemitic history and culture of the West.

We see the same in the domestic, Australian response to antisemitism. In the past few days, parts of the media have attempted to downplay the presence of antisemitism on Australian streets. When police revealed that the Dural caravan bomb could not have exploded, and so was in some sense a hoax, and that those arrested had themselves not shown antisemitic tendencies, some outlets jumped to assert that the spate of incidents over the summer were not themselves antisemitic. That is so absurd, that it amounts to gaslighting the Jewish community, who are being told that anti-Jewish graffiti on schools and childcare centres, Jewish neighbourhoods, businesses and synagogues being targeted because they are Jewish, is somehow not antisemitic.

There are civic leaders who cannot allow a reference to antisemitism to stand alone and insist on coupling it with Islamophobia. Both are repugnant, but by any empirical measure there is no doubt which is the crisis of the moment. It is synagogues that have been burned down, and Jewish homes, schools and daycares defaced. We see it in the way that Jews, or Israel, are blamed for antisemitism. For example, the student group at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music projected this on a slide at its Orientation Week event: "there is also rising anti-semitism around Australia and the world because of Israel's conflation of Judaism with their actions in the Levant". I have never seen or heard the Israeli government saying "our policy or actions represent Judaism"; it is antisemites who do that. It is the way that not Jews, but antisemites, weaponise antisemitism to deter examination of their statements for racism, by claiming that any critique is an attempt to silence criticisms of the government of Israel, when all the leading Jewish bodies state

repeatedly that criticism of the policies of the Israeli government is entirely legitimate. It is the way that at an anti-racist conference of all places, the organisers find a Jew who will attack other Jews and the Jewish community in the nastiest terms, using antisemitic tropes, as they laugh, applaud and approve.

No problem can be solved until deep causes are understood, and it is those deep causes that I have tried to uncover this evening. The resilience of antisemitism in our society will remain puzzling unless we go to its roots. The cases I have mentioned, both before and after 7 October take different forms but are composed of the same matter. I believe it is the anti-Jewish attitudes, prejudice and racism that is baked into the Western inheritance. Many of us are advocates for much of what the West has brought to the world, but the portion of its foundations that are anti-Jewish and antisemitic have to be removed and replaced. The deepest, most thoughtful and most honest work will be necessary to achieve that, but nothing else will change in the long-term until we do.

The 2025 Acton Lecture delivered by Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton, chief minister at the Great Synagogue in Sydney, turns to one of the most troubling issues to confront our society today, that of antisemitism. Resurgent antisemitism, including intimidating vandalism, has scarred our cities and shocked Australians who have been alarmed at the violent eruption of the most ancient of hatreds in one of the most free and safe countries in the world.

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About the Author



Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton is a scholar of Australian Jewish history and the Chief Minister of the Great Synagogue in Sydney NSW.

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