

Matzah ball maven's musings

Offended by Bob Carr? Then join the class action to sue him under Section 18C before they scrap it.

HERE'S the thing. I'm a card-carrying member of the notorious pro-Israel lobby in Melbourne, and I like matzah balls. So Bob Carr's diary musings about unhealthy "falafel factions", the "cunning" Israeli Ambassador Yuval Rotem, and our "shameful" influence on Australian foreign policy deeply "offends" me.

Not just me. Everyone in my Caulfield street that had matzah balls at the seder is offended. In fact, we're suing Carr under the Racial Discrimination Act's Section 18C. After all, we just have to say we're "offended" to get going.

Mind you, I don't know whether to be more or less "offended" by Carr's reference to "the pro-Israel lobby", than if he had written about the "Jewish lobby" or the "Zionist lobby". Actually, I prefer Jackie Mason's "hotel lobby". With remarkable insight, he's explained that Jews won't stay in a hotel without one.

But I digress.

Not everyone in my street wanted to go to court about Carr. All of us love matzah balls. But some of us have read Jim Spigelman, the former NSW Supreme Court chief justice, about hate speech and free speech.

"The freedom to offend is an integral component of freedom of speech. There is no right not to be offended. I am not aware of any international human rights instrument, or national anti-discrimination statute in another liberal democracy, that extends to conduct which is merely offensive."

He has a point, you know. But we concluded that the former chief justice had never enjoyed a really fluffy matzah ball. Which is why he wouldn't understand how deeply Carr has offended us. So we're going ahead with our action.

What's more, our barrister, himself a noted matzah ball maven, is out to show that Carr's comments were not made "in good faith or reasonably" and that he made factual errors. Lots of them. Moreover, our QC, who used be an SC, says the case law favours us. And he thinks there's a good chance that Carr will have to delete all references to "falafel factions" or the "pro-Israel lobby" or to "matzah balls on plastic plates" in his diary's future editions.

But we're running into a problem. The pro-Israel lobby, or to be more specific, its "gefilte fish" Sydney faction, doesn't want to join us. They say our action against Carr is frivolous.

We shall see. I'm quietly confident that not only will we win our case, but that it will set a new benchmark. As a result, I predict that the Liberal Party will drop all plans to amend 18C. After all, when

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What the "tzimmes" about Carr's thoughts on Bananas sans Pyjamas really made me think about was not 18C, but Gough Whitlam and the Chevron breakfast. That event's 40th anniversary is coming up in a few weeks and it's a reminder that the more things change ...

Let me set the scene and you may understand the connection.

In May, 1974, prime minister Whitlam called an early election. ALP leaders, especially in Melbourne, were anxious about maintaining donations and support from Melbourne's pro-Israel lobby. That support had been significant in Whitlam's earlier campaigns, especially when he won government in 1972.

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But after winning government, Whitlam chased the Third World vote at the UN and distanced himself from the Jewish community on Israel and Soviet Jewry. He emphasised "even-handedness" in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and instructed the Australian delegates at the United Nations to vote against Israel or abstain.

Aware that he was losing friends and not influencing people in the Jewish community, Labor asked its few remaining supporters to organise a breakfast for about 120 communal representatives at the then Chevron Hotel in St Kilda Road.

We ate scrambled eggs and bagels, while Whitlam hectored and warned us that there were now (in 1974) as many voters of Arab background, and that we Jews couldn't expect politicians to be only pro-Israel. After all, even conservative leaders in Britain and Europe weren't pro-Israel any more.

And then in question time, as he grew visibly angrier that anybody dared to disagree with him, he sealed his fate in our communal history with the statement: "You people are hard to please."

Here we are 40 years on. And we people, we matzah ball mavens, we hotel lobbyists, are still hard to please. Long may it be so.

Chag Pesach Sameach V'Kasher.

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