

Trendy Appointments: Australia's Special Antisemitism Envoy

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Was there any need for this? Australia's Albanese government, harried by the conservative opposition for going soft on pro-Palestinian protests and the war in Gaza while allegedly wobbling on supporting Israel, has decided to bring a touch of bureaucracy to the show. Australia now has its first antisemitism envoy, a title that sits in that odd constellation of deceptive names that can be misread for darkly comic effect. We see them often: the professor of homelessness who might be confused for encouraging it, or a researcher in genocide studies who might be misunderstood for being a practitioner.

When a government is in trouble, new committees are born, officials appointed, and fresh positions created. An essential lesson in governing is to give the impression of governing, however badly, or ineffectually, it might prove to be. Best to also badge the effort with some lexical trendiness, ever important for the shortsighted and easily distracted.

On this occasion, "social cohesion" is the ephemeral term that saddles the enterprise. In the [words](#) of **Prime Minister Anthony Albanese**,

"There is no place for violence, hatred or discrimination of any kind in Australia." As part of the government's efforts "to promote social cohesion, we have appointed Jillian Segal AO as Special Envoy to combat Antisemitism."

In a [press release](#), the PM turns social worker and community healer - all in the name of social cohesion, a vapid term which, read a different way, can be construed as not rocking the boat, or upsetting any applecarts. Call it tolerable muzzling, or permissible dissent.

"Australians are deeply concerned about this conflict, and many are hurting. In times

like this, Australians must come together, not be torn apart.” Having “built our nation’s social cohesion together over generations [Australians] must work together to uphold, defend and preserve it.”

Albanese explains that the appointment of a special office with a singular purpose is nonetheless intended to reflect a universal aspiration.

“Every Australian, no matter their race or religion, should be able to feel safe and at home in any community, without prejudice or discrimination.”

A noble sentiment. Then, the throwaway line, the gentle flick:

“We have advocated for a two-state solution on the world stage, at the United Nations.”

Duly stated, Albanese goes on to speak of the specialised role of Segal, who “will listen and engage with Jewish Australians, the wider Australian community, religious discrimination experts and all levels of government on the most effective way to combat Antisemitism.” She will keep company with “other Special Envoys to combat Antisemitism” in attending the World Jewish Congress to be held in Argentina next week.

The new appointee conveyed the gravity of her appointment.

“Antisemitism is an age-old hatred,” Segal [explained](#). “It has the capacity to lie dormant through good times and then in times of crisis like pandemic, which we’ve experienced, economic downturn, war, it awakens, it triggers the very worst instincts in an individual to fear, to blame others for life’s misfortunes and to hate.”

Listening to such comments conveys a hermetic impression, one which resists explication on cause and effect. They serve to cauterise the grotesquery of war and obscure the fury it engenders in those who respond.

In what is becoming a force of habit, Albanese’s announcement had the scouring effect on the very cohesion he was praising. While also announcing that a Special Envoy for Islamophobia was in the works, with details to “be announced shortly”, the impression was unmistakable: the concerns and fears of one group had been chronologically privileged and elevated in the pantheon of policy.

The [response](#) from the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) expressed that very sentiment. The move of appointing “a taxpayer-funded special envoy on antisemitism” was “particularly concerning as it singles out antisemitism for special government investment and attention, while failing to address the increasingly frequent and severe forms of racism experienced by Palestinians, Muslims, First Nations people and other marginalised communities.”

APAN President Nasser Mashni [expanded](#) on the theme:

“This seems to be yet another example of the Australian Government pandering to pro-Israel groups, and pitting parts of the Jewish community against the Palestinian Muslim communities – and against each other – rather than working to realise equal right and justice for all.”

Not too socially cohesive, then.

The organisation also worried that the creation of a dedicated office to combat one form of religious and ethnic prejudice was at odds with current work to combat “existing systemic approaches to anti-racism” being undertaken by the Australian Human Rights Commission’s recently appointed Race Discrimination Commissioner.

To show that such concerns were not confined to non-Jewish voices, Sarah Schwartz of the Jewish Council of Australia’s executive office [saw the appointment](#) as needlessly provocative.

“We are concerned that an anti-Semitism envoy in Australia ... will increase racism and division by pitting Jewish communities against Palestinian, Muslim and other racialised communities.”

While Segal’s appointment has already disturbed the policy waters, the looming question is what tangible effect it will have. Having now named an official for the specific task of combating a phenomenon time immemorial, the assumption is that it can be drawn out and struck down in isolation.

This raises a host of concerns. At what point, for instance, does criticism of Israel’s particularly brutal Gaza campaign veer into the fetid swamps of antisemitic indulgence? Will pro-Palestinian protestors, activists and advocates have reason to fear even greater scrutiny, in public fora or the universities? The latter question has [already interested](#) the opposition for some months, hungry for the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry into claims of antisemitism on Australian university campuses.

In this case, the government may well have inflated a specific problem by creating an office to combat it. Well-wishers will say that this is necessary to combat a monstrous blight that, if not addressed, infects the polity. But those left out in the naming game of social cohesion are already gnashing their teeth and demanding their own representatives.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Featured image: Jillian Segal is the newly appointed Special Envoy to combat Antisemitism. ([Source](#))

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