Federal Liberal MP Christopher Pyne’s speech in Support of Israel

Federal Liberal MP Christopher Pyne spoke to more than 200 people at a solidarity meeting at Adelaide Hebrew Congregation last week.

President of the Jewish Community Council Rabbi Engel, Naftali Tamir, His Excellency, the Ambassador from Israel Iain Evans, the Leader of the Opposition, and it is noteworthy that Iain changed his schedule to be here tonight for Israel and the Jewish community the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party Vickie Chapman – as well our local Member for Bragg Jane Lomax-Smith and Steve Georganas Vickie Chapman Senator Grant Chapman my Federal colleague and David Pisoni I also think is here.

We’re here tonight to support Israel. I can’t know what it is like to be a Jew right now in the world, not being of the Jewish faith. I can’t imagine what it is like to be a Jew sitting here in the synagogue, or a Jew in Israel, or a Jew anywhere else in the Diaspora, thinking about the War of Independence in 1948, the Suez Crisis, the Six Day War, Yom Kippur, the 1982 offensive in Lebanon, the Intifadas that have occurred since that time, the withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, and now to be back again in Lebanon in 2006.

The only thing that I can imagine that Jewish people around the world must be thinking is: “When will this end?” And it is a very good question.

So we are here tonight to show our support to show our support for the Jewish people, wherever they are in the world, and particularly for those people in Israel today, whether they be Jewish, Christian or Muslim, who want peace, and who want to be left alone to look after their families, to live their lives, to prosper, to die of old age, surrounded by their children and grandchildren. They are the people we are here in solidarity with tonight.

We are not here to cheer the deaths of innocent people. We are not here to be pleased or delighted with the success or otherwise of the Israeli offensive in southern Lebanon. Every death of a civilian is a terrible tragedy. Every death, whether they be a Lebanese citizen, an Israeli soldier, an Israeli citizen – every one of them is a tragedy that nobody here, or in Israel, would have wanted to happen. We are here to think about the tragedy of this latest, unfortunate offensive that Israel has had to undertake to protect its position.

The Australian Government’s position with respect to Israel is very clear and it has been consistent. It has been consistent for many decades, and it is a largely bipartisan position. We support a two state solution for Israel: a Jewish state living alongside a Palestinian state, secure and safe within its borders, recognised by all other nations in the world, and allowed to live prosperous and free. That seems, to Australians, as a reasonable proposition – and I’m sure it does to Israelis – but it seems to be a goal that has been beyond the reach of Israel in recent decades.

People say in this current time that there is no point in pointing the finger at any one side and laying the blame on a particular group, or country. People say that there is fault on both sides, and both sides need to change.

I don’t believe that that is true, and I don’t believe that we should allow it to be said without being challenged and rebutted.

Nobody believes or wants Israel to be involved in war, but it is not true to say that there is a moral relativity between the actions of Hezbollah and the actions of the state of Israel. It is not true to say that the terrorism of Hamas or the desire of Iran to wipe Israel off the map, or Syria to support Hezbollah or Hamas are somehow morally relative to the right of Israel to protect itself and its people. This is a debate which we have been having for ten – twenty – or more years. In my experience I’ve been having this debate for thirteen years as the Member for Sturt. And again in the last two weeks we hear that there is fault on both sides: Israel is not true to say that the terrorism of Hamas or the desire of Iran to wipe Israel off the map, or Syria to support Hezbollah or Hamas are somehow morally relative to the right of Israel to protect itself and its people.

It is not true, and we have to say it is not true. And then we have to explain why it is not true, because people forget. People forget that in 2000, Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon. People forget that in 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon in order to remove the threat of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation that was raining terror on northern Israel. Eighteen years later, Israel withdrew, because the international community and the Government of Lebanon with the backing of Syria promised to disarm Hezbollah, and to protect northern Israel from rockets – in those days Katyusha rockets, and incursions by terrorists.

That hasn’t happened. Six years later Israeli soldiers are kidnapped in the dead of night and removed to southern Lebanon, or the Gaza strip in the case of Hamas. Rockets still rain on northern Israel.

In the last week we have read that over a thousand rockets have landed on Israel in the last ten days, but over the last six years Israelis living in northern Israel have had to tolerate sirens in the middle of the night, air raid shelters, the odd casualty, not being able to live in peace, because the commitments given to the people of Israel when they withdrew from Lebanon were not kept. Hezbollah has simply replaced the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in Lebanon, and while we respect the Lebanese Government, and would do everything we could to help them, they haven’t been able to guarantee the safety of the state of Israel, and so Israel is left with very few options but do defend itself and its people.

This conflict began because Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and killed eight more in northern Israel.

This conflict could end tomorrow. It could end tomorrow if Syria stopped arming and supporting Hezbollah if Iran stopped providing moral support, and probably other support to Hezbollah against Israel if Hezbollah disarmed – if it recognised the state of Israel, withdrew its forces from southern Lebanon and stopped firing rockets into northern Israel. It could end tomorrow, because Israelis
I don’t want war. Israelis want the same things we want. They are a democratic country. They want freedom of association, freedom of speech, they want to prosper. They don’t want to fight six or seven more wars over a fifty or sixty year period.

So this conflict could end tomorrow.

The other piece of moral relativity that we hear about, is that Israel is killing civilians. Israel doesn’t target civilians. Israel targets military infrastructure, and those people who are firing weapons into northern Israel.

Hezbollah on the other hand – they do target civilians. That is their modus operandi. They are proud of the fact that less military personnel have been killed than civilians in the last ten days in Lebanon. They are proud of that fact. There are reports of Hezbollah terrorists firing at Israeli soldiers from behind civilians.

Hezbollah drive and park their rocket launchers, their anti aircraft machinery, alongside flats and accommodation in built up suburbs, in order to make it harder for Israel to take them out in a military sense. And it is a very clever strategy. For when civilians die, the world accuses Israel of a disproportionate response, and insists that there be a cease fire which would allow Hezbollah to regroup and reposition itself in southern Lebanon. It is a very clever strategy and it has usually worked.

It is a tragedy that Hezbollah would be such cowards, who would hold themselves out as military personnel. But most of the armies that I have studied in history march out and fight their opponents on the field of battle. They don’t hide behind the skirts of women and school children in a desire to avoid the real battle with the enemy. And that is what Hezbollah does. Hezbollah are cowards. They are not military personnel. They are terrorists and we should name them as such, and not treat them any differently.

Can I finish by saying this - you’ve probably all heard it before.

For many of us, Israel is the canary in the coal mine in the Middle East, and in the war against terror. If Israel fails, then the west will be finished. If the terrorists believe that they can destroy a country like Israel, then they will not stop at Israel.

It is the whole west that Hezbollah and Islamic fundamentalists oppose. It’s just that Israel is on the front line and we are not.

We have experienced terrorism, in Bali, in Madrid, in London, in Mumbai, in New York. But Israel has been fighting this war for over fifty years. And if Israel, like the canary in the coal mine, is allowed to perish, then the rest of western civilisation is at risk, and that is why we cannot let Israel fail, and that it is why we must fight terrorism wherever it presents itself, and that is why I am here tonight to support Israel and the Jewish people.