

# So much positive to get on with

## VIEWPOINT

GEORGE LOFFLER



WHAT we have seen during the past few weeks can in no way be considered a controversy. It is happening too late for that; this is 2000, a quarter-century since the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras started and over a decade since it became an event of great local popularity and international renown.

So, although I enjoy the *Australian Jewish News*, I cannot agree with the deluge of letters commending it for having the courage to do its job. Like the rest of us, it should have acted proactively a long time ago. Many wonderful people have not been made to feel welcome.

Our education and our history as victims of bigotry tend to make us, individually at least, moderately enlightened and humane. Few of us are bigots; by and large, we are liberal. But although personally, we may be informed and sensible, our behaviour communally has shown little evidence of this. Collectively, as Australian Jews, it has been a remarkably different story; we have long preferred to ignore some of our best people. What could motivate such an extreme discrepancy?

A clue can be found in the continuity report commissioned by the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies. After months of hearings, there was a stark conclusion: we were told to forget those who see little reason to affiliate to the community as it exists. But on what basis can we dismiss many thousands, most living in our midst, as either unreachable or lost causes, if we do not know their reasons. It is not as if these people were in the Outback, with names changed to O'Connor. Proper research should be commissioned. Dr Geoffrey Levey and Professor Emeritus Sol Encel would be well qualified to do what ought to have been seen as essential to

any community concerned with its existence — especially before deciding to ignore so many of us.

We are not in the realm of theoretical physics. The best way to ensure continuity is not to ignore the views and feelings of those most at risk of discontinuing, especially when they may have reason to be disgruntled with what we have been doing or avoiding. Besides, in making what we do more palatable to them, we are likely to make it more appealing to ourselves.

Something must be seriously wrong with our community when a distinguished panel can produce such a negative finding, and when (with the exception of Ian Bersten), this remarkable abdication of responsibility was essentially not challenged as premature and probably mistaken.

Meanwhile, the din emanates from those even more dismissive of their brothers and sisters. I wonder how many have noticed that it looks remarkably like a re-run of a situation which also resulted in an outpouring of concern at injustice within the community.

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Moriah College wanted to expel a pupil because the “wrong” rabbi had performed a conversion. The family was expected to go through it again. Nobody explained why, if we can attend Anglican or Catholic schools, we should be excluded from a Jewish school. In fact, our dayschools would do well to welcome a small leavening of Buddhists, Christians and non-Jewish seculars to make things more interesting and educational. If we appreciate living in a pluralist society which accepts us, a little reciprocity seems to be called for.

At the time of the uproar over Moriah, it looked like there was a risk of insight occurring. But the danger passed (although the problem was never properly solved). The community

went back to ignoring those whose situations or opinions were not as comfortable as its own.

Perhaps the oddest example is the most telling. It is like the Sherlock Holmes case that was solved with a negative clue — the dog had not barked! Half our students attend dayschools at considerable expense. Yet we avoid doing what is necessary to ensure they become literate in Hebrew. Children in bilingual kindergartens and primary schools acquire fluency in their second language well before puberty. Why do we do not have even one such school? Could it be that unlike many in the French or Chinese diasporas who are keen to have linguistic and cultural maintenance, this is not our chief concern? We protest too much and again avoid an obvious solution. There must be something going on that we have not had the courage to admit.

Is it that otherwise-successful adults have a fear in relation to the nature of their Jewish identity? Is there a dread of losing something irreplaceable if we look at what our Jewishness consists of? When people assume that an important part of their identity may have become an empty vessel, it is hardly surprising that they do not want to look into it. We believe the best we can do is go through motions that feel reassuring and give the impression of being culturally authentic. Awareness that there is no real belief and even less faith is unpleasant enough to be avoided, even at the cost of keeping the culture alive.

If we lack even secular faith in our Jewish identity, our “continuity” will continue, but ever more anaemic and atrophied, with numbers continuing to decline. We have lost confidence in our ability to attain cultural vitality. But what can produce that vitality if we feel unable to move beyond nostalgia, often for things we have not directly experienced? At the heart of it is this unnamed fear: mummified traditions must not be handled too vigorously lest they turn to dust. It is unnecessary.

The bizarre connection that allows enlightened individuals to be reconciled to a reactionary community is absence of faith in a Jewish renaissance. This a century after Ben Yehuda laid the foundation for the rebirth of



Dr Geoffrey Levey

Hebrew and Jewish culture. The first aliyah in the 1880s occurred well before the Dreyfus case caused Herzl to discover he was a Jew after all. It was accompanied by the writings of Ahad Ha'Am. Now that Israel is a fact, what remains of relevance is Ahad Ha'Am's cultural Zionism, which never assumed that all Jews needed to go on aliyah; on the contrary, he had the foresight to realise that if Israel was to remain Jewish in the best sense, it needed input from the Diaspora at least as much as the Diaspora needed it. Also, as Hebrew opens up not just the Tanach, but other treasures, none of us need be concerned about being too Israel-centric. We have so much to get on with. But we must wake up to the fact we have so much more going for us than we dared believe. We must read, act and organise ourselves accordingly. In the process, we will find it in our hearts to welcome all the rest of us, straight or gay, secular or religious.

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