

AICC Luncheon with PM Scott Morrison
Closing remarks by Mark Leibler
6 May 2021

Thank you, Leon.

I acknowledge the indigenous custodians of this land and pay my respects to their elders.

It's a real honour for Arnold Bloch Leibler to sponsor this special gathering, together with the Century Plaza Group.

And since the luncheon is hosted by the Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce, let me also say upfront how much we appreciate Australia's record of support for Israel and the Jewish community under Scott Morrison's Government.

Its voting record in the UN and other international agencies is consistently strong and principled, and Australia was almost a sole voice on the side of decency during its two-year term on the UN Human Rights Council.

And here today, the PM has announced that Australia will not participate in Durban 4, another UN anti-Israel hate-fest. Prime Minister, our response to this in Hebrew is Kol Hakovod, in English, all the honour to you and your government.

It's important for Israel to know that a country as well respected internationally as Australia has its back.

The last time I was privileged to share a stage with the Prime Minister was back in August 2017, when I introduced the then Treasurer to speak at an AICC luncheon on tax reform.

A little over two weeks later, of course, Scott Morrison became Prime Minister and a photo of us shaking hands at that event appeared on my desk with a little speech bubble superimposed near my mouth reading: "Stick with me, Scomo and you'll be PM one day". So here we are.

Over the past year in particular, the Prime Minister has made many brave, supremely difficult decisions, which have allowed this country to navigate unprecedented challenges remarkably successfully.

We'll know more about how the economy is faring after the Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg, has delivered the Budget in a few days' time. But listening to the Prime Minister this afternoon, the indications are pretty stunning. And of course we welcome his exciting announcements on the digital economy and the NDIS.

Rewind to this time last year, and anyone who had dared to predict the resilience of the Australian economy - well managed through trying times - the swift employment recovery, the prospect of having a federal budget in surplus by 2024 ... would have been viewed as operating in some kind of fiscal fantasyland.

I will never forget the sense of panic and doom among so many of our clients, particularly in the weeks immediately preceding the introduction of JobKeeper.

Large corporations, small family businesses, individuals – everyone looking to the future and weighing up measures to save jobs and livelihoods – suspending dividends, closing businesses, standing down employees, postponing payments to lenders, landlords and suppliers.

Viewed with the benefit of hindsight, the steps taken by businesses in those early days may seem draconian and unreasonable. But when it felt like the world could be coming to an end, these decisions were eminently responsible.

And if the bureaucracy and our regulators are able to cast their minds back to that anxious time, they must recognise the truth of this.

Also, eminently responsible over this past year has been the level of bipartisanship demonstrated by our Prime Minister, Opposition Leader and elected representatives across the country in putting the nation first.

I have said many times, in many different contexts, that there is no better place in the world to be right now. And I encourage our political leaders to continue to find room for cross party unity where opportunities arise to further advance our nation.

It is in this context that I would like to make one final note to the Prime Minister.

Prime Minister, I know today's focus is on the economy but, as this past year has made abundantly clear, the economy is not a policy island – it is very much impacted by who we are and how we feel about ourselves as a nation.

Along with strong, national interest leadership, the most credible explanation for Australia's success in combatting COVID and achieving what seems like a miraculous economic turnaround is our rare and enviable sense of community, which transcends race, religion and politics.

Which is why we must maintain a bipartisan approach to constitutional recognition of Australia's First Peoples and, as proposed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, give the decision on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament to the Australian people.

Please join me now in thanking Prime Minister Scott Morrison, not only for his speech today but for the pivotal role he has played, and continues to play, in leading the nation through this very tricky time.