



# MARONITE EPARCHY OF AUSTRALIA NEW ZEALAND AND OCEANIA

## **Celebrating a New Chapter in Lebanon's History: Unity and Support at NSW Parliament**

*Special Addresses by President Aoun, Premier Chris Minns, and Dr. Andrew Charlton highlight the deep connection between Lebanon and Australia*

**Bishop Tarabay: This is a historic gathering to support President Aoun's mission to lead Lebanon from the darkness of crises to the light of justice, hope and peace**

**Sydney – Thursday, 20 February 2025** – Under the patronage of Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay, and in collaboration with the Parliamentary Friends of Lebanon, the Australian Lebanese Friendship Committee, and the Lebanese community in Australia, a remarkable celebration took place on Thursday 20 February at the NSW Parliament House in Sydney to mark the election of General Joseph Aoun as the new President of Lebanon and the formation of a new government.

The event emphasised the critical role of the Australian Government and the Lebanese-Australian community in supporting Lebanon's journey of reform and recovery. As Lebanon faces monumental challenges in rebuilding its institutions, stabilising its economy, and addressing social crises, the solidarity and support from the international community remain crucial.

### **Dignitaries and Guests**

The evening welcomed esteemed dignitaries, Ministers, Members of Parliament, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Government Officials, Lord Mayors, Mayors, Councillors, Members of the Clergy, Superiors, and Religious Sisters, along with representatives of the media, representatives of the Lebanese political parties and leaders from the Lebanese community.

Distinguished guests included: The Hon. Chris Minns MP, Premier of New South Wales; the Hon Mark Speakman MP, NSW Leader of the Opposition; Dr Andrew Charlton MP, Member for Parramatta, representing The Hon Anthony Albanese, Prime Minister of Australia; Mr Sam Kayal, Liberal Candidate for Werriwa representing The Hon Peter Dutton, Opposition Leader, His Excellency Mr. Milad Raad, Ambassador of Lebanon, and Mrs. Roula Azar; Her

Excellency Mrs Sarah Al Dirani, Consul of Lebanon in NSW, and Mr Jaafar Mehydeen. Also present at the event were His Excellency Bishop Joseph Mouawad, Maronite Bishop of Zahle; His Grace Bishop Robert Rabbat, Melkite Catholic Eparchy of Australia, New Zealand and Oceania; His Excellency Bishop Anba Daniel, Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese; His Eminence Sheikh Riad El Rifai, National Grand Mufti of Australia; His Eminence Sheikh Malek Zeidan, representative of the Lebanese Dar Al-Iftaa; His Eminence Sheikh Mounir Al Hakim, representing the Sheikhdom Akl of the Druze Unitarian Community; Rev. Msgr Nabil Khachab, representing His Eminence Metropolitan Basilios Kodseieh, Antiochian Orthodox Eparchy; Rev. Sister Elham Geagea, Counsellor of Maronite Sisters of the Holy Family.

Speakers representing both Australia and Lebanon shared their insights and perspectives on the significance of this occasion and the shared values that bind the Australian and Lebanese communities together.

### **Opening Speech by Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay**

His Excellency Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay opened the celebration with a heartfelt speech, highlighting the unique cultural and spiritual mosaic of Lebanon: "Lebanon is the smallest country in the Middle East, but it is a significant haven of diversity, freedom, and tolerance, where more than eighteen religious communities coexist."

Bishop Tarabay also emphasised Lebanon's desire for peace and stability after enduring many years of war, stating: "Lebanon desires no more conflict and hatred. Lebanon seeks peace and stability. It should not be taken hostage by any regional or internal armed forces. Instead, Lebanon should adopt active and positive neutrality as a guiding principle to protect pluralism and guarantee its citizens the right to pursue their dreams and ambitions in a sovereign state."

He continued: "Therefore, dear friends, today is not just about speeches; it is about making history by uniting our efforts to support the new President of our homeland and his government. It is about raising awareness of the necessity of political neutrality in Lebanon. It is about renewing trust between the Lebanese people and their government. This is a unique opportunity for political and governmental reforms in Lebanon, grounded in accountability and transparency. We must ignite fresh hope in the Lebanese people so they may build a better future for themselves and their children."

He added: "As proud Australians, and together with the Parliamentary Friends of Lebanon, co-chaired by Dr. Andrew Charlton and the Honourable Alex Hawke, we turn to our government to say that this is an ideal moment to assist our beloved Lebanon with the expertise and resourcefulness for which Australia is internationally renowned.

"We do not ask for financial aid but for specialists in infrastructure, renewable energy, medicine and health, environmental care, economic management, education, women's rights advancement, scientific development, and training for the Lebanese Army. Such expertise can forge strong and enduring ties between our two nations," Bishop Tarabay concluded.

## **Australian Officials Highlight the Deep Relation Between Australia and Lebanon**

The Honourable Chris Minns addressed the attendees, stating, "I count myself as a friend of Lebanon, and we're very proud to be here to mark and celebrate the election of General Joseph Aoun as the new President of Lebanon. We all want what's best for Lebanon and the region, and this election brings hope for the future of Lebanon."

Mr. Minns added, "We're fortunate that Lebanese people brought their culture with them when they first arrived in Australia about 150 years ago, and they have made Australia their home. They keep their connections and traditions strong, passing them down from generation to generation."

"We call ourselves friends of Lebanon," Mr. Minns concluded, thanking Bishop Tarabay for his initiative and invaluable contributions to the Lebanese community.

Dr. Andrew Charlton MP, representing The Hon Anthony Albanese, Prime Minister of Australia, shared his experience when he greeted evacuated Lebanese who returned on special flights fleeing the war in Lebanon. He said, "I saw worry, tiredness, and gratitude on their faces for being able to be in a safe place, but I didn't see hope and optimism. A few months on, a lot has changed. Now their faces are filled with hope with the election of President Aoun."

Mr. Charlton added, "We're here to celebrate the election of President Aoun and Prime Minister Dr. Nawaf Salam; any nation would be proud to have them as leaders. They take office at a pivotal time."

"Mateship in Australia means standing by your friends. On behalf of the Australian Government, Australia is committed to being a good friend to Lebanon. Our message tonight is that they don't have to rebuild alone, and we will provide every support. The Australian Lebanese have contributed to every sector in Australia, and it's time to give back," Mr. Charlton concluded.

The Honourable Alex Hawke MP expressed his gratitude for attending the special gathering celebrating the election of President Aoun. Mr. Hawke said, "The most important thing is the sense of hope the Lebanese people now have. Australia has benefited greatly from the contributions of Australian Lebanese, and another asset to our community is Bishop Tarabay, who continues to foster strong relationships between our communities."

## **President Aoun's Message to the Lebanese Community**

During the evening, President of the Lebanese Republic, His Excellency General Joseph Aoun, shared a special pre-recorded message, stating:

"The special relationship between Lebanon and Australia goes beyond traditional diplomatic relations. It's a deep human connection that you and your parents and ancestors have built since you set foot on the land of this country, which has become your second home.

"I believe that the Lebanese community in Australia represents an important cultural and economic bridge between the two countries. So, I encourage you to strengthen communication with Lebanese institutions, exchange experiences, and organise conferences and events which strengthen bilateral relations."

President Aoun also expressed his gratitude to Bishop Tarabay for his unwavering support and leadership in fostering unity between the Lebanese and Australian communities.

His Excellency Mr. Milad Raad, Ambassador of Lebanon, delivered his speech acknowledging the organisers and attendees, and expressing pride and optimism for Lebanon's future with the election of General Joseph Aoun as President and Dr. Nawaf Salam as Prime Minister.

Mr. Raad emphasised the strong, historical bonds between Lebanon and Australia, highlighting the important role of the Lebanese-Australian community in fostering mutual respect and friendship. He also looked forward to continued support from Australia and the international community, saying: "Looking ahead to the future of our bilateral relations, let's hope – and let's work for it – that the coming years witness expanded cooperation between us in various areas. Integral to this is the Lebanese-Australian community, one of the largest and most vibrant in the world, which has long been a bridge connecting our peoples and countries, promoting understanding, cooperation, and goodwill."

In his address, Sheikh Malek Zeidan, representative of the Lebanese Dar Al-Iftaa, expressed his deep connection to Lebanon, saying: "Today, we strengthen the bridge of connection between expatriates and residents, a lasting bond that unites the sons and daughters of our nation."

Addressing the importance of unity, he remarked: "This moment presents a great opportunity for us to unite and stand together to save our homeland. We also hope that our Australian Government will continue to be a strong pillar in the effort to rebuild Lebanon."

The event served as a testament to the unwavering dedication of the Australian-Lebanese community and the government in fostering a strong and enduring bond between Australia and Lebanon.

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### **About the Parliamentary Friends of Lebanon**

The Parliamentary Friends of Lebanon is a bipartisan group of Australian Members of Parliament and Senators who are committed to strengthening the relationship between Australia and Lebanon. Established with the goal of fostering diplomatic, cultural, and economic ties, the group plays a vital role in advocating for the interests of the Lebanese-Australian community and promoting Lebanon's political and economic stability on the international stage.

## **About The Australian Lebanese Friendship Committee**

The Australian Lebanese Friendship Committee is a committee aimed at fostering positive relations between Australia and Lebanon, particularly within the context of the Lebanese-Australian community. It aims to promote cultural exchange, community development, and strengthening the diplomatic, social, and economic ties between the two countries.

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