

'If we can do it, why can't the rest of the country?': Inside Parliament's unlikely friendship

Stephanie Peatling, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 August 2018

Liberal cabinet minister Josh Frydenberg and Labor rising star Ed Husic have long had each other's backs.

When Husic was criticised for swearing his oath of office on the Koran, Frydenberg went on radio to defend him. A few years later, it was Husic's turn. When others in his party suggested Frydenberg had questions to answer regarding his citizenship, Husic - publicly - told them to pull their heads in.

Both men know a bit about not fitting in.



Labor frontbencher Ed Husic and the Energy and Environment Minister Josh Frydenberg in Canberra. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

Husic, the son of Bosnian immigrants who moved to Australia in the 1960s, and Frydenberg, the son of Jewish refugees fleeing the horrors of the Holocaust, have back stories many Australians - but not many politicians - can relate to.

When Katter's Australian Party senator Fraser Anning praised the White Australia Policy and called for a plebiscite as "the final solution to the immigration problem", both men knew they would have to respond.



*The front covers of The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age on Thursday.
Photo: Fairfax Media*

Neither knew the response would come in the form of a bipartisan repudiation of Senator Anning's speech, a rare moment of political and parliamentary spontaneity that saw the Coalition, Labor, Greens and independents come together to condemn the speech and speak in support of a non-discriminatory immigration program.

Husic's speech was widely praised.

"There are often occasions I can't believe I'm here. There are probably instances, with the way that I carry on, where some of you on that side and even on my side probably agree with that statement," Husic said with the mix of self-deprecation and clarity he is known for.

"The reason why it's hard for me to believe I'm here is because my parents were a product of poverty. I visited my mum's place in rural Bosnia and the house that she grew up, which is probably no bigger than this area."

"There were eight people crammed into that house, and my dad's place wasn't much different....They made it here in the late sixties, and Australia opened its doors to allow us to have the chance to be here."

At the end of the off-the-cuff speech, Frydenberg jumped up from his seat on one side of the chamber and moved towards Husic. Husic was already on his feet. The pair met in the centre of the chamber and embraced.

The image was widely shared on social media, a joyful exclamation mark that raised the spirits of many who were shocked and saddened following Senator Anning's speech.

"It was personal and it was heart felt," Frydenberg said of his friend's speech, admitting he had wiped away a tear or two as Anne Aly, a Labor MP and the first Muslim woman elected to federal parliament, spoke of her experiences.

Also in the building on Wednesday were Frydenberg's parents. It was their first visit in a couple of years.

Frydenberg's mother, Erica, was born in Budapest in 1943 and was for a time interned in the city's ghetto before escaping the Holocaust with her family. They lived in a displaced persons' camp and gained entry to Australia in 1950. His father, Harry, was born to Polish parents who left their homeland amid rising anti-Semitism before World War II.

Responding to the Katter Party Senator's call for a "final solution" on immigration, Labor MP Ed Husic said politicians can "do better".

One of Frydenberg's great aunts has her Auschwitz prisoner number tattooed on her arm.

Late on Wednesday afternoon, Frydenberg, his parents and Husic had afternoon tea in Frydenberg's ministerial office. Erica and Harry were quick to tell their son and his friend how many people had contacted them to praise Husic's speech.

Nobody mentioned Senator Anning by name.

Neither Husic nor Frydenberg volunteered it when they spoke to Fairfax Media on Thursday.

Both are frustrated by the divisive racial messages spread by parties such as One Nation and Katter's Australian Party and fanned by sections of the media.

Both wish for the day when they do not have to refute falsehoods about Muslims, Jews and any other group whose members do not look like the result of an Anglo Saxon goldfish bowl.

After all, if two MPs from opposing parties in the rough world of politics can be friends, it can't be that hard for others to look beyond their differences.

"If we can do it, why can't the rest of the community?" Frydenberg sighs.

"The thing I was happiest about yesterday [Wednesday] was the spontaneous way people came together to demonstrate we can be better," Husic says. "If the aim had been to tear people apart, well, the opposite occurred."