

Two weeks ago in these pages, Romy Leibler of the Council of Orthodox Synagogues of Australia, bemoaned the lack of Australian rabbis who have the eminence and influence of UK Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks. Last week Rabbi Yaakov Glasman, of the Rabbinical Council of Victoria responded that the comparison was unfair. Lord Sacks, in addition to his undoubted brilliance and eloquence, has the title, status and resources that come with the position of Chief Rabbi, whilst no rabbi in this country has such a platform. “Perhaps,” mused Rabbi Glasman, “were Australia to create such a position...an Australian rabbi could very well emerge as a significant player.”

The AJN’s video vox pop pursued the question, and garnered mixed views from random Jewish shoppers. Yet, without some historical perspective, and a notion of what would a Chief Rabbi actually *do*, it’s foolish to start the debate on whether to have one.

The institution of the “Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the UK and Commonwealth” was originally designed to be the Jewish answer to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Chief’s task was to wield halachic and political authority over congregations under his auspices, and to be the representative of the Jews to the government and wider world. This fitted the English passion for central control and, like so many Anglo-Jewry customs dating from that period, was modelled on the structure of the Church of England.

An attempt was made to export the role to the growing community of New York in the last years of the nineteenth century, but a combination of vested interests and the desire for the autonomy of congregation rabbis meant that the experiment was short-lived. The story of Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph was a tragic and bitter one.

A more promising example comes from a community which is close in size to ours – South Africa. The longstanding presence of the Chief Rabbi in that country is both a symptom and a cause of the strong communal infrastructure that sustains the vitality and vibrancy of South African Jewry.

The Australian community lacks the cohesion and consensus that is prevalent amongst our South African cousins, and a Chief Rabbinate that attempted to govern our disparate institutions would be doomed to failure. Tragically, even amongst the orthodox-affiliated, the lack of common purpose and agreement is all too manifest, without even considering the differences between them and the non-orthodox synagogues. But we cannot take comfort from the success of the American community despite the lack of Chief Rabbi, since we lack the sheer critical mass and energy that has been the source of their endurance.

Fortunately, there is a third model, which could prove to be just what Australia needs. This example is provided by Lord Sacks himself, under whose tenure his office has evolved very far from its original design.

Rabbi Sacks is rarely involved in strictly religious matters, leaving those to his Beth Din, and the concept of central authority is bereft of meaning as the British community is now increasingly pluralist. But with little power comes considerable influence. The Chief Rabbi teaches and inspires Jews through his speeches and writings, and speaks for Jews and Judaism to the wider

country and world. He uses his status to cajole and encourage, and brings dignity to his people through the respect that he garners from opinion-formers, politicians and the general public.

We have many rabbis in Australia who are inspiring and stirring speakers, whose intelligence and insight help their congregants to reach new understanding and appreciation of what it means to be a Jew. But none of them have the opportunity and resources to perform this role on the wider national stage.

It is this model – of a Chief Rabbi who could inspire, educate and encourage the Australian Jewish community, and who would represent and enhance the perception of Jews and Israel throughout the nation.

Establishing an Australian Chief Rabbinate would not be easy. A salary, office and budget for travel and communications would cost money, but that applies to most things that are of worth. No single candidate would be universally accepted. The appointee would serve and lead the large sector of the community that affiliates to orthodox synagogues, and relations with the Progressive congregations would require both ingenuity and integrity. But these are challenges to be overcome, not reasons to walk away.

Lord Sacks is nominally Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth. But just as our constitutional links with London are fading into anachronism,, and are likely to be reformed when the monarchy passes to the next generation, so our actual engagement with the Chief Rabbi is currently no more than other non-UK countries. When Lord Sacks retires in less than two years' time, let the Australian community appoint our own Chief Rabbi, who words and deeds can arouse and lead us towards a proud and vibrant future.