

LABOUR
FRIENDS
of ISRAEL

*Working towards a
two state solution*

Annual Lunch 2013

2nd July

Keynote speech by Guest of Honour

Rt Hon Douglas Alexander MP

Shadow Foreign Secretary

First let me say it is good to be here at today's LFI annual lunch.

This is a wonderful event and it simply wouldn't happen were it not for the support, hard work and friendship of many gathered in this room today.

In particular can I thank the sponsors of today's event - Sir David Garrard and Isaac Kaye, who are not only tireless campaigners for Israel, but also great supporters of the Labour Party and much admired advocates for all of our shared causes.

I am also delighted to see Trevor Pears, Sir Trevor Chinn, Sir Ronald Cohen and Lord Michael Levy among today's guests. I want personally to thank each of you for the support you give LFI, and for all the work you do to promote peace in the Middle East.

Can I also pay tribute to LFI's outgoing Chair, John Woodcock, and congratulate Anne McGuire on her recent appointment. Anne is a friend, a formidable campaigner and a respected parliamentarian, and I am confident she will do a wonderful job in her new role.

I also want to welcome LFI's Vice Chairs: Michael Dugher, Louise Ellman, Michael McCann, Jonny Reynolds, Rachel Reeves and Chair in the Lords Baroness Ramsay – alongside all the shadow cabinet and parliamentary colleagues gathered with us today.

In particular can I thank the LFI team – including the Chair of the Board Jon Mendelsohn – who has offered me invaluable support and advice for many years now – and to Jennifer Gerber and Ben Garratt who have done so much to make today possible.

I would also like to welcome Chief Rabbi Elect Mirvis – on behalf of the Labour Party, can I congratulate you on your recent appointment and wish you every success in your new role.

Can I also thank you Daniel for your words today, and indeed for your support and counsel in recent months. As Ambassador, you are a great asset to Israel – accessible, informed, straight in your dealings and smart in your analysis. I listened carefully to your remarks today.

Now this is the first time that I have addressed an LFI annual lunch.

I follow formidable speakers from recent years – not only our party leader Ed Miliband, but also our two most recent past Prime Ministers, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair.

So I speak to you today with a profound sense of humility.

Over the last couple of years, I have had the responsibility, and the privilege, to work to familiarise myself with the contemporary challenges faced by Israel, the Palestinians, and the wider Middle East.

And I am grateful to all those – a number of whom are here in this room today – who have given me the benefit of their time, knowledge, and wisdom as I have sought to listen and learn about the issues involved.

One thing I have learnt, is that it is customary for politicians at events like this to affirm their belief in Israel's right to exist – and the right of the citizens of Israel to live in peace and security.

I do so unequivocally.

But for me, that statement of Israel's right to exist is not an adequate or complete expression of what brings me here today.

I do not want Israel's existence to be tolerated or simply accepted, but recognised and celebrated.

As the son of a Presbyterian Minister, raised hearing my father read the scriptures, I honour Israel as a homeland dreamed of for generations.

And as a student of 20th century history, I recognise the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 as a moral necessity.

Born in the shadow of horror, the State of Israel was nonetheless imbued from the beginning with a progressive spirit, embodied by its founders and pioneers.

And despite facing existential dangers, Israel built a vibrant democracy, a welfare state that supported the poor, strong and well organised trade unions, a critical and unfettered free press, and an independent judiciary.

It has built an economy so vibrant and innovative that Eric Schmidt, head of Google recently called Israel "the most important high tech centre in the world outside of the US".

These are characteristics worthy of admiration and indeed celebration.

And it is here that I think some of LFI's most valuable work is being done.

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to visit Israel twice now with LFI – for the first time as a newly elected MP in 1998, and most recently in my first year as Shadow Foreign Secretary.

These trips were invaluable for me, as I am sure they are for many colleagues, in helping me better understand a country that too often is defined by newspaper headlines rather than personal experience.

And it is why Labour will continue to support important projects like the UK-Israel Economic Dialogue recently set up by LFI and my Shadow Cabinet colleagues – Liam Byrne, Chuka Ummuna and Ed Balls – and generously supported by Sir Trevor Chinn.

Yet, friends, we all know that this is not how Israel is seen by many people.

For too many – in particular those that see themselves as being on the Left – being anti-Israel is seen as almost axiomatic.

Yet those of us gathered here today understand that there is nothing progressive or Left wing in allying oneself with those who seek Israel's destruction, or who have no interest in, or commitment to, progressive values.

So let me say very clearly – especially to those within our own Labour movement – desist from a language of de-legitimisation; stop the movement to sever academic and trade union links; now is the time to deepen, not weaken, our economic and cultural ties across the region.

Supporters of peace must be prepared to recognise and defend Israel's achievements.

But so too must we, as supporters of Israel, recognise that these achievements alone are not an alternative to confronting those issues where still more must be done.

I will always be a proud and vocal champion of Israel's successes – be they Israel's innovative IT sector, R&D prowess, cultural creativity, strong social rights and proud record on promoting equality between men and women.

But those of us who support Israel and support peace, should all strive for a time when Israel's relations with the Palestinians and ties with its neighbours also find a place on the list of Israel's greatest achievements as a nation, not seen as the counter-point to the country's successes.

That is why today we need an urgent and passionate debate about how to achieve peace and security for Israelis, and how to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people and bring justice to the millions in the region who crave and deserve it.

But that debate is diminished, not deepened, at times by a kind of tragedy tourism: a facile and often uniformed assertion that all fault always lies on one side.

And the debate is endangered even more when the boundary between legitimate criticism of Israeli government policy, gives way to some of the worst and most familiar kinds of anti-Semitism.

I believe that requires all of us to police that boundary on a daily basis.

There has been extraordinary work done in recent years both in terms of education and in confronting anti-Semitism here in the UK.

The work that organisations like the Community Security Trust, the Holocaust Educational Trust and the All Party Parliamentary Group on anti-Semitism do should be a source of real pride for the Jewish community, but also for the UK as a whole.

But let me say, I truly believe that one of the great strengths of that APPG – and I say this with deep respect for the Jewish community – it's that it has never been seen as a Jewish organisation.

Because the struggle against anti-semi-Semitism is a struggle that is obviously intimately associated with the Jewish people's own history, but it is a struggle that we all need to fight.

The kind of society I want my son and daughter to grow up in has no place for the intolerance – the dislike of the unlike – that finds its most virulent hateful expression in anti-Semitism, but never stops there.

Anti-Semitism starts with the Jews – it never ends with the Jews.

And because the world in which my children and yours grow up is both interconnected and interdependent, today more than ever, they will all need to learn to live with “the dignity of difference.”

Respect and reconciliation has never been more needed.

Why do I say that?

Because we gather at a time of unprecedented uncertainty across the Middle East.

And for Israel that means a time fraught with anxiety and insecurity, risk and uncertainty.

This transformative time of upheaval, revolution and conflict, poses fundamental questions to policy makers within and beyond the region.

That is why recently Tony Blair called this an era of “unique unpredictability” in which all the choices “are ugly.”

And as he acknowledged, in the Middle East “the ugly choices abound”: to intervene in Syria or not; to compromise with the Muslim Brotherhood or not; did the West make a mistake in supporting the Arab upheavals or was such support inevitable?”

Against this backdrop, I sincerely welcome the election of President Rouhani in Iran. But alas I believe his victory tells you more about the Iranian people than the Iranian regime.

We know Iran is assisting Assad in his murderous assault on the people of Syria.

We know Iran funds Hezbollah and exports terrorism not just to the borders of Israel but around the world.

And we know Iran supplies the weapons that have maimed and killed our own soldiers in Afghanistan.

So believe me when I say I understand a nuclear armed Iran is not simply a threat to Israel. It is a threat to all nations.

And that is why all options remain on the table as a means of supporting the dual track of pressure and engagement.

Of course from the conflict in Syria, to the upheaval in Egypt, the convulsions engulfing the region today cause some to say the only responsible course for Israel today is to stay strong and await calmer times.

Let me be clear, Israel has a right, indeed an obligation, to defend itself, and as past conflicts remind us, that demands a strong Israeli Defence Force.

Without peace, Israel will be forced to build ever more powerful defences against ever more powerful rockets.

Yet in reality – the kind of asymmetrical threats that Israel today faces turn this traditional military equation on its head – because today primitive weapons become more potent against a civilian population precisely because, and not despite, of their inaccuracy and unsophisticated nature.

For all nations, the diffusion of power, technology and capabilities mean that today, military might alone is not a guarantee of military success.

I believe that is why so many of Israel's most recently retired security leaders are some of the most vocal and active advocates of taking the difficult steps necessary for negotiating a peace deal.

Because without progress towards peace, the moderates will be weakened and the extremists will be strengthened – making security harder, not easier, to achieve.

It was of course Yizhak Rabin himself who said that Israel must be prepared to take risks for peace.

Because resolution of this conflict is essential not just for the dignity of Palestinians, but also for the sustainable security of Israel.

I recognise that either because of frustration or exhaustion, or instead through a misplaced belief that there can be a "total victory" other than peace, there are those on both sides that now argue for a one state solution.

Just last month the Israeli cabinet minister Naftali Bennet stated this:

"...the idea that a Palestinian State will arise inside the land of Israel has reached a dead end...never in the history of Israel have so many people dealt with so much energy with something so pointless."

Let me address his words directly: to those who say a two state solution is now a fantasy, I say it is a fantasy to think a one state solution could ever be either sustainable or consistent with Israel's democratic values.

A one state solution is simply not a solution at all.

It would mean either the demise of Israel as a Jewish state or the demise of Israel as a democratic state.

It would be the end of the dream of national self determination for the Jewish people.

That is why, organisations like Hamas advocate this outcome, and it is why members of the Israeli government should be prepared to both denounce it and take actions to prevent such an eventuality.

For Israel, geography, ideology, technology and demography, all mean a “wait and see” approach carries grave risks.

Bill Clinton captured this point in a speech last week in Rehovot, so let me share with you his words:

He began by reiterating his commitment to Israel.

He said: “I love this country more than I have words to say.”

And then went on to pose a series of questions to the audience of Israeli generals, politicians and academics sat before him:

He asked:

“... Is it really ok with you if Israel had a majority of its people living within your territory who are not now, and never will be, allowed to vote? If it is, can you say with a straight face that you will be a democracy? If you let them vote, can you live with not being a Jewish state?”

“...[and] if you can't live with one of those things then you are left with trying to cobble together some theory of a two state solution.”

These questions posed by Bill Clinton help explain why the work Secretary Kerry is currently undertaking to restart a peace process is so vital.

Secretary Kerry's recent comments stating that negotiations were now “within reach” are indeed encouraging.

So making further progress will mean difficult compromise, risk and change on all sides.

And it means on both sides, we should see the other's goal as an essential part of our success, not a fundamental barrier to it.

From Israel, a recognition and acknowledgement that whatever undermines the prospects for peace, in turn undermines Israel's security in the region.

That is why I feel so strongly about the continued expansion of Israeli settlements on Palestinian lands – I believe it harms peace, and so harms Israel.

Going forward, I hope Israel can see a viable Palestinian state not as a gift to be given, but both as a right to be recognised and as a strategic necessity to be implemented

And for the Palestinians, a two state solution will require hard decisions also on their part, and that applies both to those leading the West Bank and Gaza.

Hamas knows what it needs to do to unite the Palestinian people and rejoin the international community.

Any unified Palestinian negotiating position will have to be built around a platform that acknowledges International agreements and rejects the path of violence for the route of negotiations – on this we must be united and we must be clear.

The road ahead will be hard.

Today the Israeli population lives in fear and terror continues, while the Palestinians suffer daily humiliation and an absence of basic freedoms.

In this context, hope struggles to survive.

That was one lesson taught to me by the school teacher I met in Eshkol regional high school last year. She was exactly the kind of compassionate and wise woman you hope will teach your own children.

She told me that her job was to teach her pupils the curriculum but that she felt compelled to try to teach them something else.

She told me her ambition was that no child would leave her classroom believing that the Palestinian children on the other side of the border were their enemy.

Given the constant stream of rockets, hers is a difficult task. And she admitted to me that without political change she would fail in her ambition.

So as Shadow Foreign Secretary, and I hope soon as Foreign Secretary, the words of the wise Israeli teacher I met that day will always stay with me.

I will never look upon the challenges that she and her students live through as simply an outside observer.

I cannot be just another disinterested third party.

The perspective of those most affected will be the lens through which I view these issues.

Not simply the politician, but the teacher, the parent, the child and yes, the protester.

Because distance may give us more security, but it does not absolve us of responsibility.

And it is in that light that my support for peace and support for Israel are synonymous, not incongruous.

I support a two state solution, in no small measure, because I support the state of Israel.

That is why, alongside organisations like LFI, as Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary I will work in the months and years ahead to contribute to that endeavour.
