

Making the progressive case for Israel

In memory of David Cairns



Edited by Ben Garratt

A series of essays compiled by
Labour Friends of Israel

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A series of essays compiled by
Labour Friends of Israel in
memory of David Cairns,
former Chair of LFI

Foreword by
John Woodcock MP

Edited by
Ben Garratt

Contributions by
Dr Brian Brivati, Adrian Cohen,
Michael Dugher MP, Louise Ellman MP,
Dr David Hirsh, Dr Peter Kyle, Meg Munn MP, Robert
Philpot, Baroness Ramsay, Rachel Reeves MP, Jonathan
Reynolds MP, Steve Scott and Wes Streeting

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Acknowledgments

This book is inspired by David Cairns, a great man and true friend of Israel. David was Chair of LFI on two occasions – he was always a vocal friend, and one who never walked away or stayed silent when things got tough. David became our Chair in September 2010, and developed the progressive case for Israel, a campaign he wanted to launch to ensure that those on the left of British politics can feel comfortable and proud in their support for the State of Israel.

We at LFI miss David deeply, and are incredibly proud to be able to honour him with this book. On a recent visit to Israel we were also able to plant trees in David's memory on the hills of Jerusalem, and we were pleased that David's partner Dermot was able to join us for that.

There are many people we would like to thank for their help in making this book a reality. Firstly, we are very grateful to all the authors who have given up their time in contributing fascinating and wide ranging essays. We must also thank the following people who have helped with ideas, research and analysis: Shmuel Ben-Tovim, Tali Halpin, Tamar Harris, Mark Harrison, Lerona Gelb, Carly McKenzie, Curtis McLellan, Sharon Napchan, Aya Sagi, Matt Schmidt, Tamara Schmidt and Alice Wood.

We would also like to thank all our supporters, our members and others engaged in making the progressive case for Israel. As

we continue this work, all of us can and should take inspiration from the values, beliefs, warmth and humour that David brought to this task.

Jennifer Gerber
Director, Labour Friends of Israel

Foreword: Making the progressive case for Israel

By John Woodcock MP

‘Making the progressive case for Israel’ was launched by David Cairns in a speech in March, one of the best speeches I have ever read and one which, tragically, David was unable to give due to illness. I was very proud to deliver it on his behalf. However, if I had known that it was going to be the last thing that its brilliant author would ever write, I would have been barely able to get the words out.

After David’s death I was honoured to be asked to be the new chair of Labour Friends of Israel, and to continue David’s work on making the progressive case for Israel. Shortly before he became ill, David had begun planning for a book on this subject to explore, in more detail, Israel’s progressive economy and society. So I am delighted that we have published this collection of essays by leading figures in the Labour movement on this very important issue, but I am also extremely sad that it is in memory of David Cairns, rather than introduced by David himself.

Through these essays, the authors are challenging a growing and dangerous phenomenon: the idea that to be left-wing is to be anti-Israel. By identifying only with the Palestinians, the perceived underdog, and by viewing the conflict solely through

the prism of the strong versus the weak, elements on the left are both ignoring the complexities behind the ongoing conflict and the progressive values that are lived out in Israel every day.

David identified that over the last few years, on seeing violence from the region on our TV screens and reading about failed peace efforts, we have become distanced from the true nature of Israel. He therefore recognised that we have a task to do, to bring together progressives in Israel and the UK, in order to ensure that those on the left of British politics can feel comfortable and proud in their support for the State of Israel. David was deeply concerned, as conveyed in his speech which forms the first chapter of this book, that his, and his likeminded colleagues', support for Israel was beginning to be regarded as an oddity – something artificially tacked on to his Labour-grounded support for a politics of equality of opportunity, democracy and social welfare – rather than something integral to it.

This shift is deeply worrying for two reasons. Firstly, because the misinformation disseminated about Israel is often deliberately designed to weaken and undermine the only country in the region that shares our progressive values; and secondly, because it is in the roots of our own Labour movement to be internationalist, and to reach out, support and collaborate with those that share our values, to our mutual benefit. To that end, the authors of the following chapters not only seek to identify the progressive achievements and ambitions of this young, small and proud nation, but to also identify those challenges that Israeli progressives are working to overcome in Israel today, to realise our shared ambitions.

I have just returned from the region with a delegation of Labour parliamentarians, and it was clear from our visits and meetings that, despite the challenges and frustrations of the stalled peace process, we were in a progressive country looking to the future, with so many engaged in seeking a better world for all of its citizens. Much of our discussion with Israelis and Palestinians rightly focused on the need to advance the peace process and achieve two states for two peoples. But we were able to range far wider too: we met with Tsofen, an Israeli NGO working to increase the numbers of Arab Israeli citizens employed in the thriving high-tech sector; we visited Better Place, an Israeli-run electric car venture striving to reduce the world's dependence on oil; we visited a Kibbutz, which has retained its spirit of communal work and living, whilst engaging with the modern economy; we visited a fortified high school in the deprived south of the country, built at great expense to allow students to continue their all-important-education as they suffer from rocket and mortar attacks from Hamas-ruled Gaza; we met journalists working in Israel's vibrant and free media; we discussed with senior members of the Israeli Labor party the meaning behind the recent social protests, the biggest protests in Israel's history; and we met with Her Majesty's Ambassador to Israel Matthew Gould to discuss the importance of bilateral cooperation and engaging with all of Israel's diverse society.

Rachel Reeves MP and Jonathan Reynolds MP, both Vice Chairs of LFI, joined us on this visit, and have written of the progressive nature of the Israeli economy, and how it supports, and is supported by, world-class healthcare and education provision.

In the following chapter, by setting out Israel's strong human rights record which has endured through years of existential threat, Dr Brian Brivati challenges those determined to focus only on the areas where the country falls short. In celebrating its freedom of the press and its vibrant democracy, Dr Brivati calls on progressives to work alongside, not to undermine, our liberal allies in the country.

Legal expert Adrian Cohen provides an overview of Israel's robustly independent judicial system, asserting that it is a progressive defender of individual and democratic rights.

LFI Vice Chair Michael Dugher MP and Steve Scott, Director of Trade Union Friends of Israel, make the case for close cooperation between British, Israeli and Palestinian trade unions and against boycotts.

Baroness Ramsay, LFI's Chair in the House of Lords, has written about how, despite being in a constant state of war with neighbours that seek its destruction, Israel remains a committed and constructive member of the international community.

Progress Director Robert Philpot discusses Israel's history of immigration, its efforts to integrate ethnic and religious minorities, and its international prominence as a champion of LGBT rights.

Meg Munn MP has written on the Israeli feminist movement, and the great strides Israeli women have made in the fields of education, the economy and politics.

Dr Peter Kyle discusses the profound role played by civil society in Israel, both in the founding of the state and running of the modern country.

Wes Streeting has focused on the centrality of Israel's youth movements to the country's creation, and the need for Israel's and Britain's progressive youth to work together, to achieve shared goals.

Dr David Hirsh traces the history of and reasons for the success of Zionism. He encourages support for those Israelis working for peace with their neighbours and challenges those that attempt to treat Israel as an idea, rather than an established state.

In the final chapter of the book, LFI Vice Chair Louise Ellman MP discusses the progressive and mutually beneficial nature of Britain's bilateral relationship with Israel, and urges support for this relationship, for the sake of supporting peace and mutual understanding.

All authors are writing in a personal capacity.

I hope that you find the following essays as fascinating and inspiring as I do, and that you will join us in making the progressive case for Israel.

John Woodcock is the Labour Member of Parliament for Barrow and Furness, a Shadow Transport Minister and the Chair of Labour Friends of Israel

Making the progressive case for Israel

A speech by David Cairns MP,
delivered on 15 March 2011

I want to begin by saying what this speech is not.

It's not an attempt to deflect attention from the pressing urgency of achieving an agreement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It's not an argument which posits that Israel is always right and should be allowed to act with impunity.

And it's not intended to diminish the need to resolve the complex issues of borders and settlements; of refugees; and of Jerusalem.

So let me begin by re-iterating the need for both sides to return to the negotiating table to make the painful and necessary compromises that will be required to end this conflict for good.

In all of the forums I have been involved with LFI, and in every meeting in which I have participated, this has been the consistent message. It has been conveyed to Israeli politicians of all parties, and every Palestinian leader of recent years.

And, if needs be, in months and years ahead, LFI will continue to focus on the need to resolve this tragic conflict, which has already claimed too many lives and caused too much grief.

But tonight I want to offer another message – not in contradiction to the first, but complementary. And the message is this: in a time of upheaval and unrest we will never find a just and lasting agreement if we forget or overlook the fact that that Israel is the only regional exemplar, not just of democracy but of social democracy. Its values are rooted in left-of-centre principles. It is a place where:

- women enjoy equality;
- the LGBT community flourishes;
- the media is unfettered and critical;
- an independent judiciary protects the powerless from the powerful;
- where trade unions are well-organised and strong;
- educational excellence and scientific innovation are pursued;
- religious minorities are free to practise their creeds;
- a welfare state supports the poor and marginalised;
- and, yes, it is a fully functioning, vibrant, participatory democracy.

And the reason I feel the need to deliver this message tonight is that the failure to make progress in securing an agreement to end the conflict, bolstered by opposition to the very concept of Israel, has resulted in not just reasonable criticism of Israel's conduct and behaviour, but in increasing attempts to delegitimise the Israeli state; and the advocacy of a policy which would could see its demise as a social democratic beacon.

Years ago, when I first became involved with LFI the two state solution was accepted by mainstream Israelis and Palestinians alike. It was rejected by the Israeli right and by Islamist extremists.

Today much of the Israeli right now accepts the principle of a two state solution, which is obviously welcome, and it is still the goal of the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank. But Hamas in Gaza remains committed to the destruction of Israel by force, and the so-called one state solution is becoming much more mainstream. For some, this popularity is born from frustration but, let's be absolutely clear: the one state model means the demise of the Jewish state. It is the end of the dream of national self-determination for the Jewish people. And that is why Hamas wants it.

And why does this matter? It matters for two reasons: the first is the fact of the State of Israel, how and why it came to be. And the second is the nature of the State of Israel and the values that it has come, through time, to embody.

As recently as 2001 the *Guardian*, not always Israel's most staunch supporter, called the establishment of the State of Israel a "moral necessity."

This was the long held belief of the British left; and not just the left, but the left of the left. Writing in 1968 Eric Heffer said: "When Israel was established by resolution of the United Nations, like most Socialists, I was delighted."

Why the delight among Socialists? It was their belief in the right

of self-determination for the Jewish people, the searing experience of World War II, and the overthrow of colonial rule that galvanised left-wing support for David Ben Gurion's declaration. It was precisely these reasons that gave some on the Labour right, most notably the formidable figure of Foreign Secretary Ernie Bevin, cause for concern.

The right of self-determination for the Jewish people was a matter of progressive principle and conscience in 1948 and it should remain so today. And it is because I believe in the right of Jewish self-determination that I support Palestinian self-determination too. On both sides, we should see the other's goal as an essential part of our success, not a fundamental barrier to it.

But it was not just the fact of the Jewish state that won it support from the left; it was the type of state it was to be: a socialist, egalitarian society, one where Labor would be the natural party of government.

The Declaration of Independence speaks of an Israel which: "will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture." Or as we might put it today – this would be a progressive country.

And so it remains.

But failure to secure agreement to the conflict with the Palestinians has obscured this progressive reality: it has pushed

Israel's positive story from the headlines; and it has allowed Israel's longstanding enemies to build support for false analogies with some of the ugliest right-wing regimes imaginable – apartheid South Africa and even Nazi Germany itself.

Israeli speakers are shouted down in university campuses; otherwise left-wing union leaders demand wholesale boycotts of all Israeli produce; Israeli opposition politicians are afraid to come here for fear of arrest; leftish pop stars won't play concerts in Tel Aviv; and, bizarrely, an Israeli diplomat, Ishmael Khaldi, had to abandon an address at Edinburgh University after he was surrounded by protestors chanting "Nazi" and "boycott Israel." Khaldi is a Bedouin, Muslim Israeli citizen.

As of 2010, Israel had been condemned in 32 resolutions of the UN Human Rights Council, almost half of all resolutions passed since its creation. In the decade of genocide in Darfur, unspeakable war crimes in Sri Lanka, and state-sponsored oppression of gay men and lesbians in a dozen African states, Israel remains the only country that the UN Human Rights Council has specifically condemned.

I mention all of this not to elicit sympathy or to play the victim card. But it is undeniable that today, if you are on the left it is presumed to be axiomatic to be anti-Israel.

How has this come to be? It's partly because there are two progressive principles that Israel is accused of denying the Palestinian people: one is their right to self-determination; the other is the general principle of "fairness"; the sense that the

Palestinians are not treated fairly by a powerful majority.

This belief is exacerbated by events. International sympathy for Israel rose when it was attacked by its neighbours in a series of attempted wars of annihilation. When bus bombs were exploding on a regular basis in Jerusalem, and gay bars were being targeted by suicide bombers in Tel Aviv, even hostile commentators were forced to admit that Israel was facing real problems.

And in response to this terror, to protect its people, Israel built a security barrier, which many didn't like, but has drastically limited the ability of suicide bombers to enter Israel, at least for now. And, facing security threats on the majority of its borders, Israel has been to war with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and has targeted Hamas in Gaza, who have been sending rockets into southern Israel on a daily basis since Israel unilaterally withdrew from the territory and Hamas took control of Gaza in a violent coup.

It was, I know, hard for people to watch what was happening in Lebanon and Gaza on their TV screens because innocent civilians were killed – as sadly happens in all wars.

Whereas Israel viewed these as wars of survival, support for Israel plummeted as a result. And just a few days ago we saw the terrible and gruesome murder of an Israeli family, and the pendulum swings back a little – until the next time.

And the fact is that because of Israel's understandably tough approach to security, including myriad check-points on the West Bank, as well as the security barrier, life for Palestinians

can be really hard and restrictive, and that offends our sense of fairness.

But today I want to propose a new approach for progressives. Currently the dividing line is wrong. People are either categorised as pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian. This creates a pressure to support “your” side in a sectarian, loyalist sense.

As I have set out, it’s because Israel embodies progressive values that I am a proud friend of Israel.

And yet I have observed a curious phenomenon: whenever I say something supportive of Israel I am almost always challenged to say something critical too. It’s as if I have to buy permission to say something positive.

I’m regularly encouraged to be a “critical friend” by which is usually meant more criticism, less friendship.

My point is this: I want to work with all progressives – here, in Israel and the Palestinian territories – to build the confidence and trust that will be required to bring about a lasting agreement.

I will be critical of Israel when I need to be. But I call on my friends and colleagues who support the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to cease the language of de-legitimation; to end the comparisons with South Africa and Nazi Germany; to halt the demands for boycotts of Israeli produce and people; to put an end to the movement to sever academic ties; and to recognise Israel’s strong and continuing adherence to the self-same progressive values that we fight for here at home.

It is not left wing or progressive to ally ones-self with those that seek Israel's destruction, or those who don't value one iota the type of society we strive for in this country. So I am appealing for all those who value peace and justice to support our values where we see them lived out, and to assist – not obstruct – those people working on the ground to resolve their conflict and build their progressive society.

David Cairns, Labour Member of Parliament for Inverclyde, died on 9 May following a short illness. A former Scotland and Northern Ireland minister, David was serving as LFI Chair for the second time, having previously led the organisation in 2005

Israel's thriving economy: active government support and a strong base for social welfare

Rachel Reeves MP and
Jonathan Reynolds MP

Private enterprise with public support, good employee-employer relations and a sound social security system are key to a powerful, progressive economy. The Israeli economy weathered the financial crisis well. Last year there was over 4 percent growth and, in the thick of the recession, Israel experienced just two quarters of negative growth and grew 0.8 percent in 2009. Israel has a strong, dynamic and modern economy.

Government activism

As Israel has made the transition from agriculture and manufacturing to an economy with a focus on high-tech enterprise, its companies have been able to expand, knowing that they enjoy government support. Israel presents a successful example of how an active government, engaged with universities, banks and business, can encourage innovation and entrepreneurship to create a thriving technology industry.

Today, the high-tech clusters of Tel Aviv and the ‘Silicon Wadi’ are second only to America’s Silicon Valley. They are populated by large international companies such as Google, IBM and Microsoft as well as local firms. This was not always the case: two decades ago the Israeli economy was stagnant, with low growth, high debt, and rampant inflation. There was a strong scientific and technological base, but little infrastructure to turn this into a commercial success.

A progressive government changed this situation in the 1990s, perceiving the need for the government to support the private sector and encourage investment. In 1993, a year after entering office, Yitzhak Rabin’s Labor-led government established the Yozma Programme (Hebrew for ‘Initiative’) to encourage the investment of venture capital in Israeli companies. This action directly targeted the lack of confidence in the market by giving government a key role in supporting enterprise. With Yozma, the government created public-private partnerships and reduced the risk for companies investing in start-ups by using public money as assurance. Ten venture capital funds, each starting with \$20 million, were set up with 40 percent controlled by the government and 60 percent by investors. Instead of ‘picking winners’, the government harnessed the experience and knowledge of investors.

Venture capital subsequently flowed into the high-tech sector. To encourage growth in this area, the government introduced tax relief for R&D, grants for companies and new technology incubators, all of which allowed companies to progress once they had received initial seed capital. By 2008, Israel attracted more venture capital than France and Germany combined.

Israel's policies have targeted the weaknesses of the economy to encourage full employment, with the result that the unemployment rate, at 5.5 percent, is at its lowest since 1985. In the critical water sector, the Israeli government has recently focused its attention on 'blue-tech' companies, further exploring the use of government capital to support and encourage private wealth. In 2006, the government set up another public venture capital firm, Kinrot Ventures, and has allowed the state-owned water utility, Mekorot, to provide testing grounds for 'blue-tech' companies. This state support for the water industry is necessary given the reality of Israel's location, and the pressures on a stable water supply for the population.

The result of these policies is that, despite a population of just 7.7 million, the country has an impressive lead in high-tech industries. It has the highest number of high-tech start-ups per capita in the world and, in 2009, there were more Israeli firms on the NASDAQ than those from China and India combined. At the heart of this are the hallmarks of an active and engaged government. Rather than leaving it to chance or the market to create a more productive economy, the government took the lead in shaping one.

The economy, health and education

Economic dynamism in Israel is supported by, and supports, a strong welfare state. The country has a comprehensive social security system and higher investment in healthcare and education than the UK.

Healthcare in Israel is universal in a mixed public/private

system, where every citizen has to be registered with one of four, heavily subsidised, healthcare insurers. Its high standard of health services, medical technology and research, modern hospital facilities and high ratio of physicians to population contribute to both the country's standard of health and its economy, with Israel becoming a major centre of medical and biomedical research. By 2006, for example, Israelis had produced the largest amount of publications involving stem cell research per capita in the world.

Israel's universal education system also works hand-in-hand with its economy. In 2009-2010 over half of all 20-24 year olds attended the country's institutions of higher learning, with many going into medicine, medical research, engineering and the high-tech sector. In 1924, almost a quarter of a century before the state came into being, the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology – was opened in Haifa to train engineers and architects. Today, Israel has seven research universities: Bar-Ilan University, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, the University of Haifa, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Technion, Tel Aviv University and the Weizmann Institute of Science – recently named by US-based Scientist Magazine as the best institution in the world for research outside the US.

The challenge of unemployment

However, these successes hide a problem which many other Western countries share. While Israel has been largely insulated from the effects of the recession, it still faces significant economic challenges, particularly large-scale unemployment in some sections of society.

Israel has an officially low rate of unemployment at 5.5 percent. However this figure does not register the near 40 percent of the potential work force which lies outside the labour market. This group is largely made up of Arabs and ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jews. Only around 40 percent of Arab Israeli citizens participate in the jobs market, and over 60 percent of Haredi men currently do not work at all. Given that these are the fastest growing demographic groups in the country, there is a pressing need to engage and integrate them into the labour market if the economy is to flourish in the future.

Following its successes with the high-tech sector, the government is using a similarly direct and active approach to mobilise these groups. It is, for example, investing in new equity funds to support Arab Israeli communities as well as working to bring more Arab entrepreneurs into the burgeoning technology sector. President Shimon Peres has recently spearheaded the Ma'antech Initiative that will streamline the brightest Arab-Israeli graduates into positions at top technology firms. With \$20 million of funding provided by the government and \$30 million by the private sector, this acts as another example of Israel's government working in partnership with the private sector to deliver results. Plans are now in place to provide a similar scheme for the Haredi population. Unemployment is a major test for the Israeli economy as well as the government activism that has helped shape it. Future efforts to tackle the issue should be monitored closely.

Peace and prosperity

Like in all Western countries, tackling major national challenges is made harder if elements of society feel disenfranchised. In

Israel's case, the challenges faced by sections of society are not likely to be entirely resolved until peace is found. Yet, paradoxically, lasting peace is hard to achieve without greater equality. In the long-term, Israel simply cannot afford to maintain a contrast between poorer Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews on one side and relatively affluent secular Jews on the other. This challenge also applies to economic disparities between Israel and the Palestinian territories. The dichotomy is causing economic harm, is an obstacle to peace and yet requires productive Israeli and Palestinian engagement to be resolved. For example, the Israeli tourist industry is reliant on a good security situation and, in the most violent years of the Second Intifada, the number of visitors to the country fell 50 percent. Similarly, due to the ongoing conflict, Palestinian GDP per capita is still below its 1999 levels, although this has been improving rapidly under the current West Bank leadership.

There are, then, promising signs, suggesting progressive economic and social policies are creating unbreakable ties and sowing the seeds of reconciliation. When an LFI delegation visited Israel in 2009, President Shimon Peres spoke about his Centre for Peace, which treats Palestinian children who have cancer. After treating over 4,000 children in Israel, it was decided that it would be more effective to train Palestinian doctors and provide Palestinian hospitals with the necessary equipment. Peres recognised that social equality between communities is necessary to facilitate peace.

Conclusion

With significant strength based on public-private cooperation, progressives can learn a lot from Israel's economic model. It

demonstrates that the government can be a successful partner in growth and prosperity, prosperity reliant upon, and which supports, robust education and health sectors. Though it still faces substantial challenges, this active partnership approach provides many lessons for governments seeking to rebalance and reinvigorate economies in the wake of the financial crisis. Israel's economic approach is therefore a positive, progressive example of what could be done to support the UK's businesses and regions that are crying out for the capital investment required to develop cutting edge technology and tackle rising unemployment.

Rachel Reeves is the Labour Member of Parliament for Leeds West, Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury and a Vice Chair of Labour Friends of Israel

Jonathan Reynolds is the Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament for Stalybridge and Hyde, PPS to Labour Party Leader Rt Hon Ed Miliband MP and a Vice Chair of Labour Friends of Israel

Championing, not undermining, human rights in Israel

Dr Brian Brivati

There are two important components to a progressive view of politics. The first is a world view that accepts a pluralistic approach to public policy; that does not rely on single solutions, i.e. the market or the state. The second is an acceptance that to make change happen, it is necessary to build coalitions of the willing and form alliances with other progressive forces that share our values and beliefs. In an interconnected world, in the context of the Arab spring, working with our friends and supporting them in difficult times, is an essential element of the progressive tradition. Progressives, therefore, rightly expend a great deal of energy attacking conservatives for seeing things in a one dimensional way, and for viewing states as one dimensional actors. They also, correctly, attack the right for not supporting reform movements within states in conflict, but simply condemning all aspects of countries that they do not like. However, whilst progressives are generally very good at calling their opponents simple minded for seeing the world in this way, many on the left suspend their critical faculties when they think, write or talk about Israel.

The only lens through which many on the left look at Israel

today is in relation to the territorial conflict with the Palestinians. It is as though for much of the left there is only one Israel in existence, the Israel of conflict, the Israel that is engaged in counter insurgency and in occupation of Palestinian territory. This is an absurd position, as it is always a mistake to see a state through a single aspect of its social, political or cultural identity. Furthermore, adopting such a stance limits the left's ability to influence the debate in Israel, and work with our allies there who are striving for peace and the defence of human rights.

To contribute to the stabilisation of the Middle East, we must refocus the lens that we use to look at Israel, to see it for what it really is. For most of the 7.7 million people of Israel, the experience of human rights is as problematic and contested as it is in any other liberal democracy. In fact, performance of the Israeli state is, in many respects, much better than many liberal democracies. If we cannot engage with our fellow progressives in Israel because of the state's human rights record, then we should probably stop working with progressives in France, Germany and most of Central and Eastern Europe, not to mention every other state in the Middle East.

The US State Department's 2010 report on Human Rights in Israel was clear that, in a wide range of major areas of the UN declaration and related instruments, Israel is in the top 20 percent of human rights observers across the globe. In terms of the "Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life," for instance, the report found that the Israeli government did not commit politically motivated killings and it found no reports of politically motivated disappearances. However, whilst there

were “no reports of citizen political prisoners or detainees,” Israeli NGOs frequently accuse the authorities of arresting Palestinians, on terror charges, for political purposes. This is an issue which is debated openly and critically in Israel, and an area in which many campaign for reform. In fact, the report found that there are “numerous domestic and international human rights groups” operating in Israel “without government restriction.”

This should tell us two things. Firstly, that there are mainstream progressive forces within the Israeli state who work day in and day out to uphold the values of the United Nations, and we should work with them. Secondly, that we are discussing a rules and values based system in which progressives can push for improvements and fight against backward steps. We should be working alongside them, not undermining them.

Israeli law provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the US State Department noted that Israel’s “independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views without restriction.” The country has 13 daily newspapers, at least 90 weekly newspapers, more than 250 periodicals, and numerous internet news sites, many of which are popular internationally. All are privately owned and managed. In addition, and whilst the UK’s University College Union for academics maintains a misguided obsession with boycotts of Israeli academics, the US report found that there were “no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events” in Israel.

The US report also found the country to be “a parliamentary democracy with an active multiparty system,” in which the

government implemented the law against corruption effectively, “impunity was not a problem” and the free press “routinely reported on corruption.” This was evidenced by the fact that, in 2010, “the government investigated and prosecuted several senior political figures for alleged misconduct.”

On issues integral to the left around the world, Israel also has a record to be proud of. It has strong labour protection laws, which the government respects and implements, allowing the right of association, and providing that citizens may join and establish independent labour organisations of their choice. In fact, approximately 33 percent of the total workforce is unionised and the law allows unions to conduct their activities without government interference, leading to the widespread use of collective bargaining across the workforce.

But there are other measures beyond these, on some of which Israel performs considerably better than most. On the Human Development Index, Israel is ranked 15th in the world, above all but four members of the European Union.¹ Furthermore, Israel was the only country in the Middle East and North Africa ranked as free in the Freedom House world report of 2010² and it was also the highest ranked Middle Eastern country in the global gender gap report for 2010.³

The place of human rights in Israel is much like the place of human rights in the democratic West. There are arguments, debates and cases are contested, but they are contested against norms that are recognisably mainstream. And when things go wrong, they are challenged. For example, in July a new law banning the promotion of boycotts of Israel was passed. It is a

response to international campaigns to boycott Israeli goods, institutions and people, but could clearly have a detrimental impact on freedom of expression. Speaking about the law, opposition and Kadima party leader Tzipi Livni accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of betraying Israel's democratic values, saying he is a "prime minister that doesn't know what democracy is." Gush Shalom, an organisation of Israeli peace activists, submitted a petition against the anti-boycott measure to the Supreme Court on 12 July, which will now judge whether the law should be overturned as unconstitutional. Gush Shalom were joined by the Association for Civil Rights in Israeli (ACRI).

The Jewish Chronicle in the UK published a stern editorial against the new law, declaring that "its supporters deserve every ounce of the opprobrium they receive from all decent people" as it represents "a betrayal of the very essence of Israel." The newspaper asserted that whilst it, "along with almost the entirety of Anglo-Jewry, does everything within its power to oppose the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement," the new law is a "moral disgrace." In the US, negative feeling toward the measure spans the ideological spectrum, from J Street on the left to the Zionist Organization of America on the right. Abraham Foxman, the director of the US Anti-Defamation League, attacked the new law, saying that it "may unduly impinge on the basic democratic rights of Israelis to freedom of speech and freedom of expression" and adding that "we hope Israel's Supreme Court will quickly take up a review of this law and resolve the concerns it raises." The Meretz party immediately responded by labelling all goods in supermarkets across the country with stickers informing shoppers which goods were made in the West Bank.

There are many other examples of this kind. In due course the law will hopefully either be repealed or struck down in the courts because it is so out of sync with the mainstream Israeli tradition of free and open debate. However this process will not be helped by those on the left who support the boycott mentality. It will be defeated by progressives in Israel with the support of those that share their values around the world.

Sitting in London and reviewing the human rights record of Israel compared to its regional neighbours, one must ask oneself the classic test question: where would I like to live if...? Where would I like to live if I was a journalist, a human rights defender, a human rights lawyer? Where would I like to live if I was a woman who wanted to work, campaign and dress as I wanted too? Where would I want to live if I was gay or lesbian? Where would I want to live if I wanted to protest, and for my vote to change a government?

In all cases, and in many others, though by no means more perfect than anywhere else, Israel is on a par with all Western democracies and ahead of many. And it is, of course, leagues ahead of anywhere else in the Middle East. These positive characteristics are built into Israel's DNA; they appear in its Declaration of Independence and are affirmed in its Basic Laws; they are represented in its parliamentary democracy; and they are maintained by a progressive community working hard to hold the state up to the ideals of its foundation and to its international obligations. That progressive community needs support and encouragement from its allies, to continue to fight the forces of reaction, to carry on the struggle so that the standards within Israel are extended to the Palestinian

territories, and that any independent Palestinian state is founded upon the same core values shared by progressives in Israel and the UK.

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Notes

1. http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/Lets-Talk-HD-HDI_2010.pdf
2. http://www.freedomhouse.org/images/File/fiw/FIW2011_MENA_Map_1st%20draft.pdf
3. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_IndexRankingAndComparison_2006-2010.pdf

Justice and the defence of progressive values: the centrality of the rule of law in Israel

By Adrian Cohen

On 2 August 2011 the Supreme Court of Israel issued a ruling that the State of Israel dismantle the largest illegal settlement outpost in the West Bank, Migron by 31 March 2012. According to *Haaretz*, the daily Israeli newspaper, Supreme Court President Dorit Beinisch harshly criticised the Israeli government for failing to dismantle the outpost, having promised to do so and having accepted it was in fact built on land belonging to Palestinians. She said: “There is no doubt that according to Israeli law, no settlements can be built on private lands of Palestinians.” Interestingly this is the first time that the Supreme Court has actually ordered the State to evacuate an outpost. Previously the Court had relied upon promises by the State to evacuate the illegal outposts.

One of the functions of the Supreme Court of Israel is to sit as the High Court of Justice. The High Court has powers to “hear matters in which it deems it necessary to grant relief for the sake of justice and which are not within the jurisdiction of another court.” It is also specifically tasked with ordering state and local

authorities, and other persons carrying out public functions under law, to do or refrain from doing any act in the lawful exercise of their functions. Through its jurisdiction as the High Court, the Supreme Court plays an important role in upholding both the rule of law and human rights in Israel.

Its jurisdiction is not a hypothetical one. As the High Court, the Supreme Court hears over a thousand petitions each year. Often these cases are high profile ones, challenging acts of top government officials. Access to the High Court is easy. There is no appellate process and standing to bring a petition to the court is not restricted to those directly connected to the subject matter of the case. Every person is allowed to petition the Court in matters of concern to the public.

Examples of rulings of the Supreme Court include the re-routing of the West Bank security barrier, which was constructed to protect the lives of Israeli citizens by preventing suicide bombers from crossing into Israel from the Palestinian territories. Prior to the construction of the barrier Israel had suffered 73 suicide bombings in the three preceding years. These rulings were designed to lessen the impact of the barrier on the interests of resident Palestinian civilians, often at the considerable expense of the state.

Other examples include the ruling on the opening of 14km of Highway 443, which goes through the West Bank, to Palestinian traffic (the road had been closed to them after a series of terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians); a ruling against the immediate deportation of asylum seekers to Egypt pursuant to an agreement between Israel and Egypt whereby Egypt had

agreed to secure their safety; and a ruling against the Jerusalem Municipality, Education Ministry and Treasury for taking too long to build much-needed classrooms for schools in disputed East Jerusalem. Again, the Supreme Court was vigorous in its criticism of the Israeli authorities.

Many petitions to the High Court of Justice are brought by the vibrant and active, albeit also controversial, NGO sector in Israel, including the Association of Civil Rights in Israel. Most recently a petition was presented to the Supreme Court with respect to the Boycott Law passed by the Knesset on 11 July 2011, seeking a ruling that the law is unconstitutional and anti-democratic, as it violates the right to Freedom of Expression and to Equality, which are fundamental rights of citizens of Israel. The Boycott Law makes the call for a boycott on Israel or Israeli settlements a civil wrong. 47 members of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, voted in its favour and 38 against (including the Speaker of the Knesset, Reuven Rivlin who robustly opposed it). So effective have Israeli NGOs become in bringing petitions, that certain members of the Knesset were moved to establish a panel to monitor their activities. The proposal, opposed by the Israeli Prime Minister, was however voted down in the Knesset on 20 July 2011.

One does not have to subscribe to all the causes, narrative or politics of the various NGOs in Israel to draw one firm conclusion: that the rule of law in Israel and the freedom of its judiciary play a central and essential constitutional role in Israeli civil and political life. Such a role is in sharp contrast to most of the other states in the region. This is all the more remarkable given how young the country is; that it has been in a state of

war ever since its conception; that it has absorbed vast numbers of immigrants from countries with no tradition or culture of democracy or rule of law; and that it has inherited from the Turkish and the British a Byzantine complex fusion of Turkish land law, common law and, in matters of personal status, religio-confessional laws based on some 11 recognised different creeds and religions.

Israel does not have a complete codified constitution. What it does have are a series of so-called “Basic Laws,” each of which was originally intended to be draft chapters of a future Israeli constitution. It also has a Declaration of Independence, which is of considerable normative effect and which is referenced in one of the Basic Laws most relevant to human and civil rights – the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty. Another, Basic Law: The Judiciary, states in article 2 entitled “Independence” that: “A person vested with judicial power shall not, in judicial matters, be subject to any authority but that of the Law.”

One may feel complacent about Israel’s rule of law if the comparator is, for example, the Bath’ist regime in neighbouring Syria, currently involved in the most heinous and murderous repression of its own population. Nevertheless Israel’s judicial system has proved itself able to deal with the (some at this stage only alleged) egregious behaviour of its most important citizens in a way which many mature Western democracies would struggle to emulate. Examples include the ongoing prosecution of former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, on various corruption charges and, perhaps most startling, the conviction and jailing of ex-President Moshe Katzav for rape and other sexual offences.

The trial of Moshe Katzav was before three judges in the Tel Aviv District Court. He was unanimously found guilty. Current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that it was a “day of sadness and shame” but also a “day of deep appreciation and pride for the Israeli justice system,” the Court ruling confirming that no one was above the law, not even a former president. On 22 March 2011, Katzav was sentenced to seven years in prison and two years probation, becoming the first former head of state to be sentenced to prison. Additionally he was ordered to pay substantial compensation to his victims. One of the remarkable aspects of the case was that the three judge panel was made up of two women and the presiding judge, George Kara, was an Arab Israeli. As such the case challenged some widely held misapprehensions about the nature of Israeli society.

The eminent British jurist Lord Pannick, a renowned human rights specialist, was moved to write in the *Times* earlier this year that: “There are precious few jurisdictions in the world where rape and sexual harassment by influential men are taken seriously by the police and by prosecutors. To find such allegations against a former president of the country being prosecuted before an independent court is a remarkable statement of the vigour of the rule of law in Israel.”

Lord Pannick is not the only jurist to be moved to praise the Israeli courts. US Supreme Court Justice Elana Kagan, when Dean of Harvard Law School, described former Israeli Supreme Court President Aharon Barak as “my judicial hero” and “the judge or justice in my lifetime whom, I think, best represents and has best advanced the values of democracy and human

rights, of the rule of law and of justice.” Lord Woolf, former Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, has stated that the Israeli Supreme Court is one of the best courts he is aware of worldwide.

Israel is a society facing immense pressures both internally and externally. Whilst writing this piece the country had been the subject of unprovoked attacks along its southern borders from Egypt and Gaza. Meanwhile the shadow of a likely recognition of a Palestinian state by the UN, with the unresolved possible participation of Hamas in its government, looms and with unknown consequences for the peace process. For those who demonise Israel, the commitment of its judicial system to promoting the rule of law and civil liberties is an inconvenient truth. Meanwhile true friends of Israel, committed to civil liberties, the free democratic participation of its citizens and the vision in its Declaration of Independence, should continue to champion its legal system and especially the role of the Supreme Court.

Adrian Cohen is a founder member and chair of the London Jewish Forum. He is a solicitor by profession and is a partner of the law firm Clifford Chance LLP. He writes in a personal capacity

Trade Unions and Israel: building bridges for workers rights and peace

By Michael Dugher MP
and Steve Scott

In many ways, trade unions in the UK can look with some envy at the record of trade unionism in Israel. From making a fundamental contribution to the establishment of Israel and its modern, diverse society and economy, to its effectiveness at representing working people – including Arab Israelis – Israeli trade unionism is a good example of what can be achieved by joining together.

The Histadrut (Israeli TUC) was founded in 1920 in pre-state Palestine to mobilise and establish a Jewish workers' society and a genuine movement for secular socialist Zionism. Its drive and organisational effectiveness was so strong that by 1948, when the State of Israel was established, nearly 75 per cent of the entire national workforce had joined.

In 1948, the links between what the Histadrut stood for and Jewish society, values and aspirations was so close that it was the fatherly figure of the General Secretary of the Histadrut, David Ben-Gurion, who was elected as Israel's first Prime Minister.

The Histadrut remains influential today, evident by its role in the recent campaigns sparked by the high cost of living, the lack of affordable housing and the squeeze on wages. But like trade unions in other countries, the Histadrut has had to deal with changes to the economy, including more de-regulation and privatisation, and the great challenges of how to organise and recruit in new sectors whilst coping with a declining membership in areas in which they were previously strong.

But the effectiveness of any organisation rests in its ability to adapt and change to new circumstances and in recent years the Histadrut has managed to push through notable trade union recognition agreements and benefits in the workplace. This has included: a 20 percent wage rise for social workers last year; improved employment rights for all teachers and lecturers; worker insurance up to the national average monthly wage; a five percent wage rise for all public sector workers; and pension cover for the entire private sector workforce. The Histadrut has also been effective in representing local workers in small businesses, ensuring companies fully comply with Israel's minimum wage laws, and negotiating innovative and progressive agreements, such as: rights for agency workers, computer privacy for employees and tribunals for sexual harassment complaints.

And as well as fighting for workers rights, Israeli trade unions have played an important role in forging relations with their Palestinian counterparts, an essential component of any peaceful shared future for Israelis and Palestinians. Since the Oslo Accords, the Histadrut and the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) have been working

together and, in August 2008, they signed a landmark agreement to base future relations on negotiation, dialogue and joint-initiatives to promote “fraternity and co-existence.”

Despite the difficulties of recent years, this relationship remains strong and, crucially, both sides are still talking and working together. An example of this came in 2010 when the two sides worked together under the auspices of the International Trade Union Congress (ITUC) and agreed to reject boycotts and to say that co-operation and joint initiatives between the two sides was the best way to aid peace.

Yet, regardless of this positive work, relations between Israeli trade unions and their international counterparts are regrettably mixed. Efforts by the international trade union community to help the PGFTU are to be commended, however some efforts by certain trade unions clearly aim to divide the two sides rather than bring them together. Trade unions around the world, with their age-old belief in internationalism and solidarity, should be helping to build bridges with each other, not tearing them down with calls to boycott the Histadrut. If Palestinian unions want to work with the Histadrut, why should trade unions in the United Kingdom want to see a boycott of one side?

Our great friend Sir Trevor Chinn, who has done so much over the years to support closer engagement between Israeli, Palestinian and British trade unions, once said that “Israel lives in a difficult neighbourhood.” And in these most difficult of economic times, the Histadrut has shown that it is possible to achieve improved workplace conditions and rights, whilst at the

same time providing a genuine platform for dialogue and exchange with Palestinian workers. This is something that, as trade unionists in the UK, we should be warmly supporting. Sadly, these voices are too few.

Instead of carping about the Histadrut, trade unions here at home could learn real lessons from Israel about how to organise, negotiate and campaign – even in the most challenging of times.

Michael Dugher is the Labour Member of Parliament for Barnsley East, Shadow Minister without portfolio and a Vice Chair of Labour Friends of Israel

Steve Scott is the Director of Trade Union Friends of Israel

Israel in the world: an outward expression of progressive values

By Baroness Ramsay of Cartvale

The foundation of the State of Israel was the culmination of enormous international and domestic effort. Zionists convened across the globe to discuss and prepare for the state they hoped to achieve, while Jewish communities on the ground built cities, developed agriculture and prepared new forms of modern Jewish culture, in language, literature, art, poetry and science. The UN partition plan of 1947 recognised this need and demand in UN General Assembly resolution 181 and, upon accepting Israel as a full member of the UN in 1949, the global body connected the newly recognised national homeland of the Jewish people to the other nations of the world, in a mutually beneficial relationship that continues to this day.

Since becoming a reality, Israel has remained a constructive member of the international community – assisting developing nations, leading relief efforts, and sharing its world leading technologies and scientific breakthroughs. Israel is often referred to as a Western nation in the Middle East. This is not just because it is a social democracy, but also because it deeply engages in international trade and, through the UN and other international bodies, assists the liberal global exchange of ideas

and resources. This is a proactive engagement that is sustained despite Israel's enemies frequently joining forces to exploit the UN as stick to beat her with.

Though Israel has been long considered an economically developed country, it reached a major milestone in its economic relations last year, when it was admitted as the 33rd member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – an impressive achievement considering it was only sixty-two years old at the time. While nations generally tend to trade most closely with their immediate neighbours, the tense diplomatic situation surrounding Israel has forced it to look further afield for economic partners; partners who have become close and constructive political allies. The EU, for example, is Israel's largest trading partner and no other non-European country in the world has such a close and institutionalised relationship with the EU and its policy making mechanisms. Israel and the USA also have a close trading relationship – and it is these links, bolstered by strong values-based ties, that have given Israel a solid base from which to develop its security and its high-tech economy.

However, in discussing Israel's international affairs, it would be wrong to focus only on economics. As readers will be well aware, most discussion of Israel's relationship with the international community, inevitably, is in reference to the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. As a friend of Israel and someone who longs to see a negotiated two state solution and peace between Israel and her neighbours, I believe that the people of Israel have much to be proud of in the way they have stretched out their hands to seek

compromise with those that voice and employ hostility – successfully reaching peace with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994 but, as yet, failing to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians. In recent years the number of Israelis and Palestinians in favour of a two state solution has grown, with support for two states for two peoples, side by side, now a mainstream aspiration even for some on the right of Israel’s political spectrum. However, deep challenges remain, not least Hamas’ Iranian-backed violence, so it is vital that progressives around the world continue to support those Israelis and Palestinians working on the ground to achieve peace.

It would be a tragedy, if as a result of the “Arab Spring,” doors in the Arab world, even the few which have been opened hitherto, were to slam shut as a result of the hate propaganda perpetuated through generations in the Arab world. How ironic if a movement with the potential for positive democratic momentum in countries crying out for human rights, should be hostile to the country in the region which practises so much of what the Arab Spring aims for and desires.

But I want this chapter to focus on another, less touched upon issue – Israel’s progressive relationship with the international community beyond conflict and economics. As a strong advocate of international engagement, I find much to support in the way in which Israel works productively with the international community to achieve our common goals. The assistance that Israel provided to the victims of the tragic Haitian earthquake last year represents Israel’s ongoing commitment to helping those most in need, but is also a stark reminder of why this commitment must be celebrated. When

the huge earthquake struck, Israeli aid workers were some of the first on the scene, leading the search and rescue effort. When the initial rescue phase came to an end, the Israeli teams gave lessons on how to give trauma support and also built a new school for some of those orphaned. While these teams did not work for praise, they certainly didn't expect to be accused of opportunism and attempting to distract attention from the plight of the Palestinians. Unbelievably, one member of the House of Lords even suggested that an investigation should be opened into whether Israeli aid workers were in Haiti to steal human organs! That is as offensive as it is ridiculous.

As LFI's late chair David Cairns eloquently expressed in March this year: drawing attention to Israel's progressive values is not in contradiction to a desire to see a lasting peace in the Middle East, but is complementary to it. He wrote that: "In a time of upheaval and unrest we will never find a just and lasting agreement if we forget or overlook the fact that Israel is the only regional exemplar, not just of democracy but of social democracy. Its values are rooted in left-of-centre principles."

Israel's operation in Haiti was by no means an isolated example of its progressive international endeavours. Israel has been an unsung participant in rescue operations and international development projects across the globe for decades, regardless of the politics of the nation affected. In fact, whilst rarely remarked upon by the international media, Israeli experts cooperate daily with Palestinian and Arab counterparts on a number of ongoing development projects. For example, Israeli researchers at Ben-Gurion University are working in parallel with researchers from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait – both of which refuse to have diplomatic relations with Israel – to identify a

defective gene that causes a rare and usually fatal disease in Arab children arising from calcium deficiency.

Israel's primary providers of emergency aid and development resources are MASHAV, a government unit established in 1958 to focus on "bottom-up" community-driven development, and the Israeli Defense Force's Home Front Command Search and Rescue Unit. Mashav was established to share Israel's poverty-combating innovations around the world, particularly with countries in Africa that also suffer from a lack of water and farmable land – and it recently successfully encouraged the UN General Assembly to adopt its resolution on promoting green agriculture. The unit's role has only increased as Israel's private sector has become a world leader in advanced technologies, including medical and bio-medical technologies. Through its solar innovations, Israel is contributing to the worldwide fight against climate change; its water purifying technologies have become a critical tool around the world for tackling child mortality; its water conversion innovations are assisting the advancement of sustainable forms of agriculture; and with the development of its biomedical sector, Israel has become increasingly engaged in international efforts to tackle disease, including the UN's work to prevent the spread of HIV and to reduce malaria deaths. In April 2003, Ben-Gurion University's Professor Yoel Margalith received the Tyler Prize, the world's premier award in environmental sciences, for his contribution to the fight against malaria. Professor Margalith has been working with Palestinian and Jordanian scientists since 1993 to eradicate mosquitoes in the Jordan valley and the Tyler committee commented that his breakthroughs had "saved millions of lives with minimal environmental impact."

Numerous Israeli NGOs are also engaged in international development and poverty assistance, under the umbrella of IsraAID. One such organisation is Save a Child's Heart (SACH), based in the Wolfson Medical Centre near Tel Aviv, which provides urgently needed surgery for children from developing countries suffering heart diseases. Since its establishment in 1994 it has treated over 1,400 children from Ethiopia, Nigeria, Zanzibar, Congo, China, Vietnam, Ghana, Jordan, Moldova, the Ukraine and the Palestinian territories.

It is for these achievements, ambitions and more that Israel should be applauded and, as David Cairns argued, should also influence, not be artificially extracted from, our efforts to support peace in the Middle East. Despite being in a constant state of conflict since its creation, and despite its people having to come together to protect themselves from frequent and violent attacks, they have never turned inwards, but continue to look outwards with an eagerness to participate in all international activity. For that attitude they should be commended and welcomed by those of goodwill wherever there is need for international cooperation to deal with the problems of the world.

Baroness Ramsay of Cartvale is the Chair of LFI in the House of Lords. She served in the British Diplomatic Service from 1969 to 1991 and now sits on the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy

Israel's minorities: a progressive example

By Robert Philpot

On 24 May 1991, Israeli forces airlifted 15,000 Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa to Israel. 'Operation Solomon,' the successful one-day military operation, completed the migration of the Beta Israel, a secluded Jewish community living in a remote, famine-hit rural area of northern Ethiopia, which had begun during the mid-1980s. In all, 120,000 Ethiopian Jews have arrived in Israel – a country of just 7 million people – since that time; the largest migration out of Africa since the Slave Trade and the only one that has not been forced.

The story of the Ethiopian Jews' migration to Israel illustrates the complexity and uniqueness of the country's attitude towards diversity. On arrival, the Ethiopian Jews, like other immigrants, were provided with an 'absorption basket,' to cover their expenses for the first six months in their new country, as well as housing expenses for their first year. And the Ethiopian Jews are not, of course, unique. More than one million Russian Jews arrived in Israel in the early 1990s, the latest of a series of waves of immigration into the country since its foundation just over sixty years ago.

With the possible exception of the United States – which is currently experiencing one of its periodic reactions to the liberal

approach to immigration that has characterised much of its history – it is difficult to think of another country in the world which encourages and celebrates such levels of diversity. Indeed, Israel can rightly claim to be one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse countries on the planet.

Unlike in the UK or most other Western countries, where the issue of immigration has remained politically contentious throughout the post-war period, immigration is one of Israel's most sacred cultural values. Its 'Law of Return,' passed in the immediate aftermath of Israel's creation as the world's only Jewish state, reflects the notion that the country should be a home for Jewish people across the world fleeing persecution. And while the UK's immigration points-based system and immigration cap supposedly favours those with the highest skill levels, Israel's citizenship policies focus on those with Jewish roots, allowing people of differing levels of skills, wealth and education to make 'Aliyah'.

Israel's Law of Return is not without controversy or difficulty and it remains a matter of debate in the country itself. Whilst the country also operates a naturalisation process that allows those not of Jewish origin to obtain citizenship, some argue that the Law of Return grants rights to Jews that others governed by the State of Israel do not have, while others claim that the law – which was amended in 1970 to provide a particularly inclusive definition of who can claim to be a Jew – allows too many non-Jews into the country, thus undermining its purpose. Indeed, the diversity of those gaining citizenship under the Law of

Return can be seen in the fact that almost one-third of Israel's immigrants from the former Soviet Union do not define themselves as Jewish. In addition, the likelihood of new immigrants being able to speak Hebrew, the country's most commonly spoken language, is far slimmer than the likelihood of immigrants to Britain being able to speak English.

The story of the Ethiopian Jews does not, though, end with their arrival in Israel. While most, in fact, received higher levels of assistance – on average estimated at £65,000 in state financial support by the middle of the last decade – than other immigrant groups, by 2005 it was clear that even this had been insufficient, as evidenced by high levels of unemployment and child poverty. The position of the Ethiopian immigrants, moreover, contrasted with the Russian ones, who by 2006 had lower average unemployment rates than Israel's pre-1990 citizens. In 2008, therefore, the Israeli government accepted a five year-plan – including roughly £140 million of spending – to address the challenges facing the Ethiopians, with housing, urban regeneration and access to higher education prioritised. Most recently, the Israeli Air Force has joined the effort: launching a new project to absorb and integrate Ethiopian Israelis into its ranks and, afterwards, into universities.

The Russian and Ethiopian Israelis are just two examples of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Jewish population of Israel. Although most can be split into two broads groups – the Ashkenazim and Sephardi – who trace their origins, in the case of the former to eastern, central and Western Europe and the

latter to southern Europe, there are also Jewish communities from the Yemen, Iran, Egypt and other surrounding Middle Eastern countries. Moreover, while Jews comprise roughly 75 percent of the Israeli population, the vast majority (the major exception being the 600,000-800,000 ultra Orthodox Haredi Jews) are secular.

The country is, of course, not only home to Jews. Between a quarter and a fifth of the Israeli population are not Jewish, with Arabs making up around half a million of Israel's citizens. The majority of them are Muslims, although approximately 100,000 are Christians, and there are also 12,000 Arab Druze Israelis and 170,000 Bedouin. The major religious sites of four religions – Judaism, Islam, Christianity and the Baha'i – are in the country and Israeli law guarantees freedom of worship to all. In fact, Israel's Declaration of Independence of 1948 states that the country will: “ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions.” Furthermore, the declaration appealed on: “the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.”

While the Druze and Christian Arabs are the most integrated into Israeli society – and the Bedouin are confronted by housing and land rights issues – the position of Israel's Arab Muslim

citizens is perhaps the most difficult and intertwined with the wider issues of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. By referring to themselves as 'Palestinian Israelis,' many Arab Muslim citizens reflect the tension between their Israeli and Palestinian identities that they feel.

These tensions were graphically illustrated by the deadly confrontations in the north of the country which took place between Arab Israelis and the police in 2000. In response, the Israeli government set up a commission under Supreme Court judge Theodore Orr to investigate the disturbances and the police response. It criticised the police for being unprepared and using excessive force, and reprimanded a number of individual officers. It also levelled criticism at the Israeli security minister and at Arab politicians for their role in inciting the violence.

The focus of the government's response since has been on trying to rebuild trust and confidence between Arab Israelis and the police. The latter opted in 2004 to recognise the Abraham Fund Initiative, a charity which seeks to advance equality and coexistence between Israel's Jewish and Arab citizens, as the official provider of its educational activities on democracy, civil rights and egalitarian service in a multicultural society. Moreover, the police agreed that the Fund's Community-Police programme, which was launched on the back of the Orr commission's findings and aims to encourage cultural sensitivity towards Arab Israelis, should form part of the formal activities of its Human Resources Department.

By September 2009, progress on the issues identified by the Orr commission had begun to be made: with new police stations opening in Arab towns, funding for the recruitment of 250 Arab Israeli police officers, and nearly 4,000 volunteers from the Arab community recruited into policing and citizen service. The policing and citizen service drive reflects the fact that, due to political tensions, Arab Israelis are exempt from military service, although they may choose to volunteer. While the reasons behind the exemption are understandable, it does mean that Arab Israelis are excluded from the informal networking and education and training opportunities that military service provides.

Perhaps of equal importance to the debate around policing sparked by the rioting, was the fact that the Orr commission found that Arab citizens suffer socio-economic inequality, with the government failing to properly address their needs. This was the first such public official acknowledgment, and was welcomed by Arab advocacy groups.

Examples of inequality between Israeli Jews and Arabs can be seen in too many places. For example, despite affirmative action programmes in the civil service, Arab Israelis remain underrepresented in public administration, as well as business, finance and insurance, while they are overrepresented in low-skilled trades, construction and retail.

Nonetheless, it is also important to acknowledge the progress in the prospects of Arab Israelis that is being made. In November

2009, for instance, a rise in the number of Israelis living in poverty overall was accompanied by a drop in the number of Arab Israelis living below the poverty line, reflecting their increasing participation in the job market. Indeed, while levels of unemployment between Arab Israeli and Jewish Israeli men are comparable, there is a stark contrast between the 81 percent of Jewish Israeli women who work and the 28 per cent of Arab Israeli women who participate in the workforce. This suggests that issues around culture, women's rights, and gender roles – as opposed to ethnicity – play some role in the overall socio-economic status of Arab Israelis.

Further efforts to improve the prospects of Arab Israeli citizens are now being made by the government, businesses and various NGOs: a £40 million private equity fund was launched in 2009 and a £140 million five-year economic development plan to boost employment, housing, transport and safety in 12 Arab and Druze towns was passed by the government last March.

Arab participation in Israeli governance has also begun to improve in recent years: in 2004, Salim Jubran became the first Arab to be selected for a permanent seat on the Israeli Supreme Court; in 2007, the first Arab Israeli to sit in the cabinet was appointed by then prime minister Ehud Olmert; and the current deputy speaker of the Knesset is Ahmed Tibi of the Ta'al Party, an Arab political party.

As a liberal democracy, Israel rightly wishes its political system, attitude towards civil liberties, human rights and the treatment

of minorities to be compared with other Western democracies. However, comparisons with its Middle Eastern neighbours are also instructive. While the onset of the Arab spring may lead to progress elsewhere, Arab Israelis still enjoy greater political and civil liberties than Arab citizens do in just about any other Arab country. And while the Orr commission's findings served as a reminder for many Israelis about the difficulties faced by their fellow Arab citizens, it is difficult to imagine the government of Saudi Arabia publishing a report critical of its treatment of women, Shiites or non-Muslims.

That contrast between Israel's treatment of minorities and that of most other countries in the region is perhaps starkest when it comes to the position of Israel's LGBT community. While gays and lesbians face discrimination, imprisonment, violence and death in the likes of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Israel is at the forefront of promoting equality for its LGBT community.

While Israel inherited laws banning same-sex relationships from the British mandate, and these were not formally repealed until 1988, the Israeli attorney general made clear in 1963 – four years before their repeal in Britain – that they would not be enforced, and there is no record of these discriminatory laws ever having been applied after the country's formation in 1948. In many other respects, Israel has been ahead of Britain in its approach to gay rights: the Knesset banned discrimination in the workplace in 1992; the IDF rescinded regulations discriminating against sexual minorities in 1993; same-sex partner benefits were recognised in the private sector in 1994

and public sector in 1997; and the age of consent was equalized at 16 in 2000, the same year as in the UK. Since then, in 2005, it was made legal for lesbians to adopt children had by their partner via artificial insemination from an anonymous donor. Israel's first openly gay member of the Knesset was elected in 2002, and its first openly gay judge, human rights campaigner Dori Spivak, was appointed to the Tel Aviv Labour Court this year.

Israel does not currently have same-sex marriage, despite overwhelming levels of public support. However, because all marriages are the responsibility of religious authorities rather than the state, civil marriage – including for heterosexuals – doesn't exist in Israel. The country does, however, recognise civil marriages – including of gay couples – that take place abroad and both the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem municipalities accept gay couples as legal familial units.

As in Europe and the United States, gay pride parades in Tel Aviv draw huge crowds – estimated at 100,000 this year. Jerusalem gay pride also passed off peacefully this year, after previous years have seen tensions with ultra-Orthodox Jews, including a violent attack on participants in 2005. This year, Jerusalem's police made clear their determination that: “any attempt to disturb public peace will be dealt with resilience and determination.”

While Israel's LGBT community has legal protections, high levels of public acceptance and tolerance, and the law

enforcement agencies to guarantee its rights and freedoms, the position of Palestinian gays and lesbians is much more fraught. In the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority punishes gay sex with jail terms of between three and ten years, and extra-judicial punishments by the authorities and relatives are also frequent and severe. It has also been reported that the Palestinian police often offer those caught the option of becoming ‘undercover sex agents’ to entrap other gay Palestinians rather than serving long jail sentences.

In the Gaza Strip, meanwhile, Hamas has made homosexuality illegal under the strict Islamic laws it has imposed since violently seizing control in 2007. Recent research also indicates that the number of attacks on gay Palestinians by Islamist militias have increased steeply in recent years. These attacks will no doubt have been, in part, incited by the inflammatory language used to speak about gay Palestinians by Hamas leaders, such as Mahmoud Zahar who described them as a “minority of perverts and the mentally and morally sick” and recently attacked the West, asserting: “You do not [even] live like animals. You accept homosexuality.”

The frequent accusations of ‘collaboration’ with the Israelis, made by Palestinian leaders, highlight the no-man’s land in which gay Palestinians find themselves. Many attempt to flee to Israel – an estimated 300 to 600, most residing illegally, are believed to live there – to escape the repression meted out upon them. However, since the spate of suicide bombings – and reports that gay Palestinians were forced to ‘atone for their sins’

by carrying them out – which were inflicted upon the country after 2000, Israel has tightened its previous willingness to grant gay Palestinians residency rights on humanitarian grounds. Instead, new laws introduced in 2003 mean that only those who have helped Israel's security forces are normally granted such permits. Recent amendments allowing Palestinians with Israeli partners to settle do, however, also apply to gay Israeli and Palestinian couples.

Many Western liberals, who loudly proclaim their support for the Palestinians and detestations of the Israelis, remain utterly silent about this issue: gagged by their own fear that addressing the subject will expose the repressive nature of the Palestinian leadership to which they have turned a convenient blind eye. Israel's treatment of its minorities may, like all Western societies, be imperfect at times, but it stands in stark contrast to the Palestinian authorities' treatment of theirs.

Robert Philpot is the Director of Progress, the New Labour pressure group

Women in Israel: fighting for equality and peace

By Meg Munn MP

When Israel was established in 1948 the equality of all citizens was affirmed in the Declaration of Independence. Israel's founders proudly asserted that: "The State of Israel... will uphold the full social and political equality to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." Today's Israel broadly reflects the gender equality found in other countries in the developed world and is by far the most gender equal country in the region.

Achieving greater levels of gender equality obviously requires a lot more than political declarations, and progress in this area, like in the UK, has relied upon the long-term efforts of committed activists. Whilst the Israeli feminist movement, which remains strong to this day, was influenced by ideas emanating from the feminist and broader civil rights movements of the US and Europe, it was not until the trigger of the national crisis brought on by the 1973 Yom Kippur War that the movement began to reach a wide audience. During this three-week war it was realised how hampered the Israeli economy was by its reliance on male labour. With men of fighting and working age at war; factories, businesses, offices, and transportation all virtually closed down.

This material opportunity provided a space for the emergence of radical and grassroots feminist organisations who, through intensive lobbying, succeeded in encouraging the creation of a government commission to examine the status of women in Israel which, in turn, led to the first major legislative milestones. During the 1980's and '90s, and as campaigning on feminist issues became uncontroversial, proponents of women's rights, and specific legislative and government measures to promote women's rights, gained a foothold in the Israeli parliament and, in 1996, succeeded in creating a statutory Parliamentary committee on the status of women.

As a result of years of activism and political successes, women now do better in education than men, and increasing numbers are represented in the professions. However, there is still some way to go in terms of equality in the workplace, with a continuing, but decreasing, gender pay gap, not dissimilar to the one we find in the UK. A survey in 2000 found that 45 percent of the workforce were women, but only 15 percent worked full time, with more women living in poverty than men. This is particularly true for women from Israel's minority communities.

I have seen women in significant roles; in parliament, the army and in organisations working to achieve peace and reconciliation. There are a number of organisations in civil society working to improve the position of women across all communities, as well as campaigning to reform the religious control of marriage laws which hampers women's rights. As progressives, it is these champions we should be reaching out to and working alongside, to our mutual benefit.

Politics

Israel has had a number of prominent female politicians. Golda Meir became prime minister in 1969, at that time only the third woman in the world to hold such an office. The Kadima party, the largest party in today's Knesset, is led by Tzipi Livni, who is considered one of the most powerful and influential woman in democratic politics around the world.

Member of Knesset Shelly Yachimovich has recently won the Labor party leadership contest, becoming the first woman to lead the party since Golda Meir. Upon winning, Yachimovich urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to recognise a Palestinian state alongside Israel as part of negotiations and told her supporters:

“We intend to be the bridge between the historic Labor movement and the new winds blowing on the street... We are a new non-sectarian party. We are committed to the poor and the rich, to Right and Left, to Haredim and seculars, to Arabs and Jews.” (21/09/11)

Yuli Tamir, from Israeli's Labor Party, was Education Minister and subsequently resigned from the Knesset at the end of last year. She presented a document she had authored on proposals for a two state solution to an LFI delegation in 2005 and was a founder of Peace Now, a grassroots movement dedicated to raising public support for the peace process.

But Israel continues to have a low percentage of women in parliament. In the Knesset there are only 24 women out of 120; 20 percent compared to 22 percent in the House of Commons.

Israel's electoral system based on nation-wide proportional representation has failed to achieve greater representation for women, suggesting that politicians of all parties have not given sufficient priority to this issue.

Military

During a visit to Israel in 2009 we had a tour of the Lebanese border with retired Colonel Miri Eisen. One of very few female colonels in the IDF, Miri has had a long and distinguished career including as spokesperson for the Israeli government on defence issues. At a security post on the border I observed female soldiers operating cameras and scanning the screens to monitor and record activity by Hezbollah. We were told that women have been found to be better at this task than their male counterparts.

Like men, women are conscripted for military service after high school, serving two years while men serve three, although some highly skilled roles require women to serve longer. Currently 80 percent of military positions are open to women and 26 percent of Israeli Defense Force officers are female. Women began joining combat units in 2000 and by early 2004 there were around 450 women in them. However, in common with many countries, there are still too few women in senior posts.

Women's involvement in the military is important for the security of the country, but the networking opportunities whilst serving can also significantly affect future job prospects. In particular the increased involvement of women in combat and intelligence positions gives greater access to high-tech systems, which in turn helps women's employment in Israel's booming high-tech industry.

Society

Arab Israeli women (17 percent of female Israelis) enjoy the same legally enshrined freedoms as Jewish women. In fact, Israel is one of few Middle Eastern countries where women are able to vote, dress freely and be elected into a public office. However, challenges of inequality remain, due to both racial and gender inequality.

Visits to Israel provide the opportunity to see projects where people are working to overcome the challenge of gender and racial inequality, aiding peace and reconciliation. Hand in Hand is a network of bilingual (Hebrew-Arabic) schools where Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel study together. On a visit to one school we saw young children learning in each other's languages, breaking down misconceptions and ensuring that they could communicate with each other.

In addition, the Givat Haviva Institute was founded in 1949 with a focus on education for peace, democracy and coexistence. I have had the opportunity to visit one of their centres to meet women who were taking courses to improve employment chances, courses with both Arab and Jewish women working alongside and supporting each other.

Conclusion

The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict influences all aspects of life, and women's rights are no exception. Many women working to improve equality between men and women are also engaged in activity to bring forward just and peaceful solutions to that conflict. By working alongside progressives in Israel's feminist movement, progressives in this country have the

opportunity to support Israel, as it continues to strive for its goal of equality for all of its inhabitants, and to support regional efforts towards peace and a two state solution.

Meg Munn is the Member of Parliament for Sheffield Heeley and is Vice Chair of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Israel's third sector: vital for the challenges of today

By Dr Peter Kyle

A remarkable feature of Israeli history is the profound role played by civil society, both individual and organisational, from pre-state society right through to the professionalised service delivery agent of a 21st century welfare state. Whilst this is not unique, after all most industrialised countries have been shaped in differing degrees by charitable activity, the particular impact on Israeli society is nonetheless profound and enduring.

What makes Israel stand out so clearly is the timescale. Britain, as is often asserted, has a very noble tradition of charitable activity that long predates the welfare state. A quick scan of the charitable register will throw up examples like the Hospital of God, founded in 1273 to provide help for soldiers returning from the crusades, and almost 800 years later still providing residential support for servicemen and women and grants to other local charities. Or the City Bridge Trust, whose origins can be traced to 1097 and has reinvented itself countless times since to remain relevant through the ages, and today uses its considerable financial endowment to fund some of the most innovative third sector activity happening today within Britain's capital.

The institutional memory from organisations like these, who trace their origins back to medieval England, have played a

substantial but mostly subtle role as the nation evolved through the centuries. But in Mandatory Palestine with its imperfect economic, social and governance frameworks, there were no guarantees of long-term stability in which to incubate civil society in the way Europe enjoyed. Its needs were more pressing and, in the absence of a modern state to provide social infrastructure, civil society quickly began to fill the void and new formal and informal associations emerged.

So the period from the 1930's marked an intense growth in civic actions and innovation. The Mandate Government's lack of willingness to provide services led to a plethora of civic organisations providing educational, health, welfare, employment and housing services. Yet it went further. It's fair to say that voluntary action underpinned society itself in this period by serving as the organisational, economic, administrative and political infrastructure of the Jewish community.¹ It would be easy to romanticise this period, but in truth the non-governmental community was probably highly politicised with competing visions of a future society, with religious, secular, and Zionist motivations intersecting. This phenomenal activity was largely funded by the charitable donations of the Jewish Diaspora, enabling Jewish communities to operate independently of the Mandate which they lived under.

Into this mix is thrown the extraordinary kibbutz movement, founded on the shores of the Sea of Galilee in 1910 by survivors of the Pogroms in Russia. Its Marxist ethos of communal living and working attracted young idealistic people from the global Jewish left, who emigrated to join and eventually set up

kibbutzim across the country. Run on democratic principles with no permanent leaders, each kibbutz centres on some form of industrial activity. Even school children on their days off were – and still are – expected to contribute to the industry of a kibbutz.

So by the time of the establishment of the Israeli state, I would argue that the ethos of civic action, participation, volunteering, and charitable endeavour was already in place. The period from the 1930's through to independence posed many acute challenges, but the social activism of the time embedded a series of values which would underpin society as it transformed into a nation state. Since this time, the multiple conflicts and unique societal challenges faced by Israel have forced changes upon its third sector. But here we must disentangle these factors from a series of trends which swept the industrialised world in the same period, most notably the establishment of welfare states.

In Israel, the organisations providing so many of the social provisions, such as education, employment and social services, were simply nationalised in order to collectivise the nation's welfare provision. It was not a wholesale process; health remained independent as did more selective services such as education for ultra-Orthodox students.

The nationalisation of charitable endeavour was not unique to Israel. Indeed, it happened on an even greater scale in the United Kingdom in the same period with the establishment of the National Health Service and other key welfare services. A great example of this transition is illustrated by the history of the Rainer Foundation. Founded in 1788, the charity soon

began to promote ‘reformation’ as an alternative to prison. In 1907 its staff became ‘officers of the court,’ and in 1938 its service was nationalised to become the probation service we know today. Rainer continues to offer crime reduction services having just undergone another of the most modern trends within the third sector – a merger with another charity to form Catch 22, a cutting edge charity which is actually a joint contract holder to run prisons in order to prioritise offender rehabilitation within the criminal justice system.

There are examples of similar trends within Israel. The Magen David Adom (MDA) is a charity founded by a nurse in 1930 as a volunteer association providing medical support to the public. Within a few years it had grown into a nationwide service, and in 1950 rather than fully nationalise the organisation, the Knesset passed a law making MDA the official national emergency provider. This provided the security of state backing, yet enabled it to retain its third sector status and therefore its close links with civil society. Today the organisation has over a thousand trained medical personnel, but crucially also benefits from 10,000 people volunteering over a million hours per year, and is a member of the International Federations of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

The trend illustrated here of integrating voluntary workers into a modern, professionalised service is evident also in the kibbutz movement. Aya Sagi, Director of the Volunteer Department at the Kibbutz Movement, said:

“Volunteers have contributed immensely to the development of the Kibbutzim in specific and of Israel

in general from the days of its establishment. They have helped in man power in many branches that almost collapsed when men had to go to war or when there was too much work for too few people. They also created good and healthy relationships between Israel the Diaspora and other people from around the world, relationships that the fruits are seen today in the Kibbutzim.”

Both of these examples illustrate two traits of the Israeli third sector. Firstly, the avoidance in a few instances of wholesale nationalisation has facilitated a more direct relationship with civil society, keeping the door open to volunteer participation on a scale unimaginable within parts of the British NHS, for example (although, it must be said, volunteers have always played a significant an indispensable role in specific parts of the NHS, but today's increase in voluntary participation has come through partnership with charitable organisations). Secondly, is the use of volunteering as a means of strengthening relationships with the Jewish Diaspora in a very real and meaningful way. Both the MDA and the kibbutz movement have very active programmes for overseas volunteers. Last year alone 1,200 international volunteers came to Israel for placements, 72 from the UK.

In line with global trends, the third sector in Israel has been undergoing another period of intense change since the beginning of the century, brought about by reforms in the way public services are delivered. Of Israel's 44,846 charities, the largest sector, religion, is in decline. On the other hand, education, social services, development, and housing are all fast

expanding sectors. This reflects the challenges every industrialised nation faces in utilising the strengths of the third sector, to deliver publicly funded services to citizens with greater care and efficient use of public funds.

It is easy to look at the sheen of a professionalised service and think it lacks heart. I think this is to misunderstand the role of the third sector in a modern society, where even volunteers take pride in using the latest systems and techniques to ensure vulnerable people receive the very best support. And when you look at the astonishingly difficult challenges faced by Israel at this time, it is clear that the third sector is needed in a myriad of different circumstances.

The heritage of social activism and civil engagement that runs through to the very foundations of the Jewish state are clearly needed now as never before, but history has shown us that it is robust and capable of bridging the divide between state and citizen – Israel could do worse than look to this resource to tackle many more of today's pressing challenges.

Dr Peter Kyle is Deputy CEO at ACEVO, the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations

Notes

1. Haggai Katz, Benjamin Gidron, Nissan Limor – The Israeli Center for Third Sector Research, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2009

Youth activism should be harnessed to make the progressive case for Israel

By Wes Streeting

On the weekend of 3rd September 2011, 500,000 students and young people in the Middle East marched through the streets, demanding a better way of life. They were not part of the Arab Spring, which has swept through North Africa and the Arab world at a breathtaking pace with enormous consequences for the people of the region. Had they been, they would have marched at great personal risk, possibly paying with their lives. They were Israelis, marching through Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and beyond, to protest soaring housing prices and rising costs of living for young people. This was the largest protest ever seen in Israeli history and involved up to 6 percent of the population.

In Britain, we are witnessing a revival of youth engagement and political activism. The Tory-led government's policies on university tuition fees, the gutting of local youth services, the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance and soaring youth unemployment have meant that the youngest and poorest have been the worst hit by the recession. The response has ranged from organised protests like the National Union of Students' 50,000 strong march in central London, through to spontaneous walk outs by school children and college students.

A generation often characterised as computer gaming, apathetic couch potatoes have begun to find their voice.

Yet in Israel, although the scale of the protests has been unprecedented, youth engagement in political activism has long been markedly higher than in Britain. Around a third of Israelis are believed to be involved in social activism of one kind or another; of these 25 percent are young people – second only to those in the 51 to 64 age bracket in terms of their involvement. Approximately 15 percent of young Israelis are believed to be involved in the youth wings of the political parties, in student unions and in national trade unions – a figure that British political parties should be very envious of.

Much of the explanation for Israel's relatively politicised young people can be found in the Jewish state's youth movements. Youth movements occupy a special place in Israel's history; the Zionist movements that grew up around the world at the turn of the last century were central to the State of Israel's establishment and construction. Young people travelled from afar to become the pioneers that would build great cities like Tel Aviv, as well as kibbutzim, that would also become short-term homes for volunteering travellers visiting the country. Today, as in previous decades, many of those moving to and making Aliyah to Israel have come through a Jewish, Zionist youth movement at some point in their lives.

From the ages of 8 to 18, youth movements – often organised along political or religious lines – engage young people in education and entertainment, promoting Zionism with a heavy emphasis on social action. Unsurprisingly perhaps, just as many leading members of the British Labour Party rose through the ranks of Labour Students and the NUS, the influence of Israeli

youth movements can be seen in Israel's leaders. Hanoar Ha'oved Vehalomed (Working and Student Youth), for example, was founded by the Histadrut (Israeli TUC) as Hanoar Ha'oved in the 1920s, taking its current name following a merger in 1929. Its graduates include former Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres – Israel's current President – as well as current Vice Prime Minister Moshe Ya'alon. Today, the movement has some eighty thousand members.

This youth movement, in particular, has been central to Israel's recent social protests, which have not only comprised marches through the streets, but have also seen tent cities sprout up across the country, unifying diverse voices in the call for greater support for the poor and those middle classes struggling to afford the basics. In this role, the movement was able to draw on a deep history of social action. Many of its members still live communally, establishing shared kibbutz communities and centres of education, assisting vocational schools, working in Israel's poorer neighbourhoods and encouraging underpaid employees to join trade unions. Hanoar Ha'oved Vehalomed's Dror Israel movement, for its older members, has even produced detailed policy recommendations for the Israeli government to encourage greater equality, calling for new national targets to bring down the Gini Coefficient by, amongst other measures, increasing levels of employment, improving workers rights – particularly for women – and enhancing access to education, healthcare and housing.

The extent of youth engagement in Israeli history, politics and civil society could offer a degree of hope that Israel's future leaders may succeed where past Israeli and Palestinian leaders have failed: in bringing about a lasting peace, based on a two

state solution. Indeed, young Israelis are at the heart of many movements pushing for peace. Reut Sadaka, for example, was founded by Israeli and Palestinian young people in 1982 to promote mutual understanding as a path to peace. Seeds of Peace – now an international organisation – was created by Israelis, Palestinians and Egyptians along similar lines, training young leaders in conflict areas with the hope that they may, one day, take on leadership roles to bring about an end to conflict. OneVoice, a grassroots movement of Israelis and Palestinians pushing for a two state solution, while not exclusively a youth organisation, has enjoyed significant support from young people in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Central to its work are leadership workshops for young Israelis and Palestinians that provide training in public speaking, conflict resolution, community mobilisation and leadership. In addition, the Histadrut's Hanoar Ha'oved Vehalomed affiliated movement also seeks to build bridges across the region, working with the youth wing of the Palestinian Fatah movement and cooperating with Egyptian youth movements where possible and, through its Arab and Druze clubs, ensures that Israelis of all ethnicities can have a voice within the labour youth.

Of course, just as there are no inevitabilities about the future of the Israeli Labor party and the success of the progressive left in national politics, youth politics is not solely the preserve of the left. Likud, in particular, has an active youth and student wing that enjoys increasing support amongst young Israelis. But there is cause for optimism. Whilst the Labor party is currently in a weak position, only the fourth largest party in the Knesset, the Young Guard of the Labor party remains strong and active, offering the party the prospect of growth and renewal. In fact, the head of Israel's Hebrew University Student Union, Itai Gutler, won on a Labor party ticket, played a central role in

Jerusalem's tent city, and is regarded as a rising star in the party. In addition, the centrist Kadima party comes from a position of relative strength as the largest party in the Knesset and its leader, Tzipi Livni, has widespread youth appeal. The left will need to harness this energy to defeat an Israeli right that, whatever the tectonic shifts of recent general elections, has managed to keep a grip on power. This is a challenge that Shelly Yachimovich, the new leader of the Israeli Labor party, is well placed to meet given the strength of support she enjoys amongst younger members of the party.

There is also a strong case for greater international cooperation between Israeli youth movements and Labour Students and Young Labour in the UK. Some links have been fostered over the past two decades, primarily through Labour Students leaders in the NUS. The Young Political Leaders Trip to Israel, coordinated by the Union of Jewish Students, has given successive generations of NUS leaders, including members of Labour Students, the opportunity to see the causes and consequences of conflict first hand, providing an insight into the complexity of an international issue often propagandised by the Socialist Workers Party on campuses for their own ends. As a result, Labour Students have maintained a strong stance against Israeli boycotts and attempts to delegitimise Israel on university campuses. It was Labour Students' leadership of NUS that also strongly backed the admission of the National Union of Israeli Students into the European Students Union.

Whilst greater involvement and partnership may provoke opposition from those whose default position is the promotion of boycotts, divestments and sanctions of Israel, this must be challenged. Debate, and the opportunity to share it with those

on the left of Israeli politics, should provide an opportunity to build practical solidarity with young Israelis and Palestinians, moving us away from the divisive tactics of the delegitimisers, to a more rational debate about how to create the conditions for a peaceful two state solution. Young Israelis have already shown a willingness to engage in that debate through a UK campus tour – Israel Awareness Week – in which a group of young Israelis ventured onto campuses across the UK with a tradition of aggressive, SWP-led anti-Israel activism to provide students with a more balanced perspective on the conflict.

That same zeal and willingness to engage, if harnessed, could breathe new life into Israeli politics and the stalled Middle East peace process. But if Israel's next generation takes up the progressive mantle, there is no reason why the youth movements that were central to Israel's creation could not secure Israel's future through a two state solution and a politics that includes all Israeli citizens.

Wes Streeting is a Labour and Co-operative Councillor in the London Borough of Redbridge and a former Labour Students President of the National Union of Students

Israel is not an idea which requires justification, it is a nation state, forged by history

By Dr David Hirsh

What is the progressive case for Israel? Why should a nation state need somebody to make its case? What is the progressive case for France or for Poland? Before the French Revolution, the question of France was still open. Was Marseille to be part of the same Republic as Brittany? When there was a political movement for the foundation of France, then there was a case for and also a case against France. When Poland was half engulfed by the Soviet Union and half by the Third Reich, there was a progressive case for Poland. But today, thankfully, Poland exists. It doesn't need a 'case'.

There are reasons to be ambivalent about nationalism. Nationalist movements have often stood up against forces which threaten human freedom. Nationalism offers us a way of visualising ourselves as part of a community in which we look after each other. But being part of something also means defining others as not being part of it, as being excluded from it. The left should fight for freedom with the nationalists but we should also remember the dangers of nationalism. Like John

Lennon, we should imagine a world where people no longer feel the need to protect themselves against external threat, but until it exists, it is wise for communities to retain the possibility of self-defence.

Progressives in France or Poland might hope to dissolve their states into the European Union, or into a global community. In that sense there is still a possible case to be made for Poland or for France. But nobody thinks that either has to justify their existence to anybody outside. Not even Germany after the crimes of the Second World War had to justify its existence.

In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, radical Jews were split on how they should oppose antisemitism. Some wanted to dissolve all religious and national characteristics into a universalistic socialism where everybody would treat each other with respect and where the distinction between Jew and non-Jew would eventually be forgotten. Others wanted Jews to organise themselves into culturally and politically Jewish Bunds which would defend them from antisemitism and would construct Jewish identity in new, egalitarian and empowering ways. A third school of thought argued that national self-determination was the key to guaranteeing people's individual rights, and they wanted Jews from all different places to forge themselves into a sovereign nation. This last group, the Zionists, made a progressive case for Israel while the other two, the Socialists and the Bundists, made progressive cases against Israel.

In the 1940s the overwhelming majority of the Jewish Socialists, Bundists and Zionists were systematically murdered, alongside

Jews who had no opinion, who had other opinions, who only understood themselves to be Jewish through their religious communities and alongside those who thought of themselves only as loyal German, Czech or Dutch citizens. Jewish culture in Europe was wiped out. There were a few survivors here and there but most of them felt it unbearable to continue to live amongst those who had killed everybody they knew, and amongst those who had failed to prevent the killing, and amongst those who still had their children and their friends and relatives.

Before, during and after the Holocaust, Jews tried to leave Europe and they went wherever they were allowed. Lots of Jews were learning the dismal lesson that the Twentieth Century beat into so many around the world: if you have no state of your own, you have no rights. On April 20th 1945, a British army chaplain helped organise a Shabbat service five days after the liberation of the Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp. A contemporary *BBC* radio report says that it was the first Jewish religious service held without fear on German soil for a decade. The report says:

During the service the few hundred people gathered together were sobbing openly with joy at their liberation and with sorrow at the memory of their parents and brothers and sisters who had been taken from them and gassed and burnt. These people knew they were being recorded. They wanted the world to hear their voice. They made a tremendous effort which quite exhausted them.¹

The exhausting effort they made was to sing Hatikva, the Zionist national anthem, so it could be heard around the world. This was how they made their progressive case for Israel. For many survivors, getting out of Europe was not enough. Having been taught that they couldn't rely on others to help them, they wanted Jewish national self-determination. Feeling safe was too much to hope for, but it would make them feel that if they were again threatened as Jews, then they would be able to die defending themselves, collectively, as Jews.

Even now, there was still a case to be made for and against Israel. Perhaps immigration into Palestine was too dangerous for Jews; perhaps Israel was an impossible and utopian idea. Perhaps the need for Jewish self defence could be realised within some kind of bi-national arrangement with the Arabs of Palestine.

But as the Holocaust had defeated the Socialists and the Bundists, so these other criticisms were answered, not by argument or reason but by huge, irreversible events in the material world; in this case by the UN decision to found Israel, and by the defence of the new state against the invading armies of neighbouring states which tried to push the Jews out.

The Jews, armed by Stalin via Czechoslovakia, in violation of a British and American arms embargo, were not pushed out. About 700,000 Palestinian Arabs left, fled or were forced out during the war and were not allowed back by the new State of Israel. For them this was truly a catastrophe but the Israel-Palestine conflict was never inevitable. It was the result of successive defeats for progressive forces within both nations. It is still not inevitable. Neither could the fact of the conflict

possibly delegitimise a nation. Nations exist and do not require legitimacy.

Isaac Deutcher, Trotsky's biographer, who had been a Socialist anti-Zionist before the Holocaust, wrote the following in 1954:

I have, of course, long since abandoned my anti-Zionism, which was based on a confidence in the European labour movement, or, more broadly, in European society and civilization, which that society and civilization have not justified. If, instead of arguing against Zionism in the 1920s and 1930s I had urged European Jews to go to Palestine, I might have helped to save some of the lives that were later extinguished in Hitler's gas chambers.²

Deutscher was not embracing Zionism as an ideology, he was recognising that the debate was over. Israel now existed in the material world and no longer just in the imagination.

Antisemitism treats 'the Jews' as an idea rather than as a collective of actual human beings; an idea which can be opposed was transformed into a people which could be eliminated. To think of Israel as an idea or as a political movement rather than as a nation state makes it possible to think of eliminating it too.

Israel needs to find peace with its neighbours, amongst whom hostile and antisemitic movements have significant influence. It needs to continue to fulfil contradictory requirements, as a democratic state for both its Jewish and non-Jewish citizens,

but also as a Jewish state, guaranteeing the rights of Jews in particular. There is nothing unusual about a social institution finding pragmatic and difficult ways to fulfil contradictory requirements.

But what if it turns out that Zionism's promise to build a 'normal' nation state was utopian? Perhaps the poison of the Holocaust is not yet spent. Maybe Israel is, as Detuscher thought, a precarious life-raft state, floating in a hostile sea and before a careless world. Perhaps the pressure on Israel from the outside, and the unique circumstances of its foundation, are creating too many agonising internal contradictions and fault-lines. Whereas people used to tell the Jews of Europe to go home to Palestine, now they tell the Jews of Israel to go home to Europe. Whereas 'the Jews' were thought to be central to the workings of capitalism, today Israel is said to be the keystone of imperialism. If the Palestinians have come to symbolise the victims of 'the West' then 'the Jews' are again cast in the symbolic imagination as the villains of the world. Perhaps Israel is precarious and perhaps we have not yet seen the final Act of the tragedy of the Jews. And if it comes to pass, there will be those watching who will still be capable of saying, with faux sadness, that 'the Jews' brought this upon themselves.

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Notes

1. This recording is easily accessible on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syUSmEbGLs4>, downloaded 25 August 2011, Smithsonian Centre for American Folk Life.
2. Isaac Deutscher (1968) *The Non-Jewish Jew and other essays*, London: Oxford University Press, pp 111-113

Britain and Israel: a progressive bilateral relationship that deserves our support

By Louise Ellman MP

The exciting announcement that Professor Daniel Shechtman of the Technion at Haifa was to be Israel's 10th Nobel Laureate highlights the extraordinary achievements of this vibrant young democracy, established in 1948. It has a small 7.7 million population in a territory the size of Wales.

The diversity of Israel's other 9 Nobel laureates, encompassing literature, economics, chemistry and peace, reflects the vibrancy of the resilient Israeli nation. Israel's constant struggle against those who seek its destruction has not diminished the country's ability to make major advances in commercial, medical, academic and scientific fields. Neither has it held back its remarkable outreach in sending vital humanitarian medical assistance to crisis situations around the world, including to Haiti, Japan, Uzbekistan and Congo.

Britain's strong engagement with Israel at a number of key levels is to be welcomed and has been promoted by Labour over many years. The British TUC and Histadrut – Israel's trades union

movement – have until recently been close allies. Israel's wide variety of forms of common ownership, ranging from communally owned kibbutzim to farming, transport, building and banking co-operatives, have fascinated progressives over decades. Mutually beneficial co-operation between the two countries now cover trade, academia, science and security, including combating terrorism.

Britain's ambassador to Israel, Matthew Gould, who was appointed under Labour, should be praised for his intensive efforts to promote both economic and academic links between the two countries. Bilateral trade between the UK and Israel has consistently been worth over £2 billion over the last ten years and is expected to reach £3 billion this year. This is reflected in the large number of companies involved in bilateral trade. There are over 300 Israeli companies in Britain and, in 2010, over 1,200 Israeli companies exported to the UK.

However, joint activity is by no means restricted to commerce. Both British and Israeli governments have supported important initiatives to encourage research and development between the two countries. BIRAX (the Britain Israel Research and Academic Exchange Partnership) was established in 2008 by the British and Israeli governments, with the support of the Pears Foundation and UJIA, with the aim of strengthening academic cooperation between universities in the UK and Israel through the awarding of grants for joint scientific research. In addition, in 2010 the UK-Israel Life Sciences Council was launched and one of its key programmes involves a £10m grant for regenerative cell therapy. This is an excellent example of utilising high level scientific and medical knowledge to international benefit.

Israel's successful Open University is modelled on the British Open University and owes a great deal to the friendship between the then Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Minister Jenny Lee with their Israeli counterparts. When the British Open University celebrated its 50th anniversary, Israeli representatives joined Mary Wilson, Harold Wilson's widow, in the gardens of 10 Downing Street, marking the long-lasting friendship between the UK and Israel in the field of education.

The UK's efforts to secure peace between Israel and its neighbours continue to be vitally important. Tony Blair as Prime Minister played a key role, not only in defending Israel against aggression, but also in assisting Palestinian statehood. Gordon Brown continued this policy, hosting, for example, a special Palestinian investors and donors conference in London and leading a business delegation to the region. Speaking with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem in 2008, Gordon Brown pledged to "stand behind the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people in their efforts to achieve peace and justice." In December 2007, the UK committed to spend nearly £210 million between 2008 and 2010 on long-term assistance and state building projects in the Palestinian territories.

Tony Blair in his current role as Quartet representative has been highly successful in assisting the Palestinian Authority in building effective institutions of governance and aiding economic development. According to the World Bank, the West Bank's economic growth reached a dramatic 9 percent in 2010. These are essential building blocks for a successful Palestinian state. Britain's diplomatic involvement at European and

international levels will be very important in steering the way to Palestinian statehood without threatening Israel's security.

It is tragic that there has not been political progress in securing agreements on borders, Jerusalem and refugees. The solutions have, however, been identified since the negotiations at Camp David and Taba. Both Palestinians and Israelis know what must be done to secure agreement. In fact, a comprehensive deal was very nearly reached in 2008 when then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered the Palestinians 100 percent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip via land swaps, so it is certainly worth the parties trying again.

The Labour Party must continue its constructive approach, including pressing for a return to urgent negotiations to secure a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel and it must resist the temptation to join Israel's detractors under the guise of being a "critical" friend; this would undermine its influence.

I therefore find the silence of the Labour Party in two recent developments disturbing. Judge Goldstone's recent retraction of his UN Human Rights Council inquiry's unsustainable conclusion that Israel deliberately targeted civilians in Gaza during Operation Cast Lead – when Israel sought to protect its citizens from Hamas' rocket attacks – has elicited little international response. And secondly, the recent UN inquiry that found that the 2009 Turkish flotilla contained people that were intent on violence, and that Israel's blockade of Gaza is both legal and justified, also attracted little international attention. These international failings provided the Labour Party with opportunities to demonstrate its fairness and

commitment to Israel's security, vital to any final status agreement – an opportunity that was unfortunately missed.

The recent events of the “Arab Spring,” where populations have risen up against their dictators, make it even more ludicrous that Israel remains the primary focus of the UN Human Rights Council. Yet, too few on the left are willing to point out problems with this body, even when the routine persecution of political dissidents, gay people and discriminatory treatment of women in countries such as Iran, Syria and Libya remains virtually ignored.

A progressive Labour foreign policy would welcome increased ties with Israel across a range of activities. It would encourage co-operation between British, Israeli and Palestinian trade unions and would assist the Palestinians in building a viable state alongside Israel by continuing to help build Palestinian governance and facilitating a return to direct negotiations. It would reject the negative rhetoric of boycotts and sanctions and absolutely condemn those like Hamas who reject Israel's legitimacy and display anti-Semitism through the claims that Jews have undue power and are engaged in an international conspiracy.

Shimon Peres, President of Israel, has written about his vision of a peaceful Middle East where Israel and Palestine live side by side, in a supportive region. The flourishing economies and cultures that could thrive would be in Britain's interest, benefiting international trade and co-operation.

The British Labour Party is at the crossroads. It could follow

the TUC by heeding the voices of negativity, boycott and demonisation or it could continue to lead the way by working with both Israelis and Palestinians to secure the peaceful two state solution that has been elusive for too long. That could help make Shimon Peres' vision a reality and open up new opportunities for the UK.

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This is a call for the left to recognise that, in good times and bad, Israel has undeniably positive attributes: a free and vibrant media; a robust, independent judiciary; strong trade unions; a generous welfare state; equality for gays and lesbians; and an unrivalled commitment to free, world-class education. It is to remind ourselves of the values that brought us into progressive politics, and to acknowledge that there is still only one country in the Middle East where those values are lived out every day. This is the progressive case for Israel.

David Cairns, February 2011

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two state solution*