

ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE ECAJ TO THE ALP NATIONAL CONFERENCE FRINGE EVENT

“PEACE, JUSTICE, RECONCILIATION FOR PALESTINE AND ISRAEL”

Mr Chairman, it is of course a great privilege to participate in this “fringe event”. Now I know what it means to appear “off Broadway”.

I want to congratulate the ALP for holding this event as part of National Conference and to particularly thank Paddy Crumlin and the MUA and Paul Howes and the AWU for sponsoring this important panel discussion.

I want also like to take this opportunity to congratulate Paul and the AWU for being at the forefront of the establishment with others internationally, of TULIP - Trade Unions Linking Israel and Palestine.

TULIP is the very type of practical initiative that can and no doubt will, promote understanding, justice and reconciliation between Israeli and Palestinian workers as a vital part of building peace where it really counts - not only between States and governments, but at the grass roots between the people they represent.

Before I deal with some other practical initiatives for the Australian Labor movement of which I am a proud member, allow me to say something about the prospects for peace.

I do not wish to be polemical, dogmatic or to focus on the past or to lay blame. Rather, I hope that we can express our views in a context of what I understand and expect will be a respectful and temperate exchange of ideas amongst well meaning and concerned supporters of peace, justice and reconciliation for Palestine and Israel.

It is trite to observe that the resolution of the issues involving Israelis and Palestinians is difficult and complex. But without wishing to be overly simplistic, it seems to me that such resolution hinges on one fundamental proposition, viz: a 2 state solution.

That phrase “a 2 state solution” contains 2 notions: a solution; and 2 states. What the world wants, and what Israelis and Palestinians desperately need, is the creation of 2 States as part of a comprehensive peace settlement that will bring about an END to the conflict, and not merely mark the beginning of a new PHASE of the conflict.

That is, there must be universal recognition that the establishment of a Palestinian State will end the conflict and will also end any claims that one side may have on the other that are not dealt with in the terms of the final peace settlement.

The peace treaties between Israel and Egypt and between Israel and Jordan in each case terminated the conflict between the parties. Similarly, a peace settlement between

Israel and the Palestinians must terminate the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and not merely become a springboard for new claims, demands, violence or war. In industrial language well understood here, it must be a “no further claims” agreement. Anything less than that would be a 2-State “NON-solution” that would only guarantee more bloodshed and privation for both peoples.

Let me explain what I mean by “2 states”. I refer to a Jewish state of Israel, that is, a State of the Jewish people, and an adjacent State of Palestine, which is the State of the Palestinian people. This is the essential concept that was adopted by the UN General Assembly in its historic resolution on 29 November 1947, endorsing the partition of the country.

Back in 2003, Israel’s then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon expressly recognised that the Palestinian state will have territorial contiguity and be economically viable. It will most likely consist of the Gaza Strip and about 93% of the West Bank. That part of the West Bank on which the major settlements are located – about 7% of the total area – would be absorbed into Israel and in return Israel would cede part of its pre-1967 territory of equivalent size, to the new State of Palestine.

It goes without saying that within each of the 2 states of Israel and Palestine, the civil and religious rights of members of ethnic and religious minority groups must be recognized and properly protected. In each case, individual members of minority groups must have equal civil, religious and voting rights and equal legal status to individual members of the majority group.

All the rest – borders, Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, security arrangements, international guarantees, water-sharing arrangements and the like, are properly matters for negotiation between the parties. Imposed solutions are problematic because it is hard to make them stick in the long term, even in conflicts where one of the parties has been comprehensively defeated. In the case of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, where there is no comprehensive winner or loser, imposing a solution on either party is not only undesirable but also impossible.

I am optimistic that a 2 state solution is achievable. Indeed recent positive developments especially in the West Bank demonstrate that such confidence is not misplaced. The New York Times and the International Herald Tribune both carried reports in the last month of the growing sense of personal security and economic potential spreading across the west bank as the Palestinian Authority’s security forces move into the second year of consolidating law and order. This is of critical importance. Israel can give the Palestinians land, but it cannot give them statehood. Statehood is something the Palestinians must build and achieve for themselves, although others can and no doubt will, render assistance. The preconditions of State-building are peace, stability and security protected by the rule of law. Only if these pre-conditions are satisfied will a Palestinian economy and civil society be able to function and flourish.

There are encouraging signs that this has started to happen. The IMF is about to release its most upbeat report in years forecasting economic growth of 7% in 2009 in the west bank, while much of the rest of the world has been in recession. Car sales in 2008 doubled over the previous year, new town construction is underway, new businesses have opened, the total number of checkpoints have been reduced from 43 to 19 and it is now possible for Palestinians to travel from Jenin in the north to Hebron in the south without passing through any check points.

Of course this is only a beginning. Further improvements to the economy and to life on the west bank involving the parties and the international community still remain to be made.

But the positive trend is unmistakably there, including it must be observed, the drastic reduction in the loss of innocent civilian life.

And it is in that particular context that the Australian Labor Movement ought now to consider practical initiatives to assist the parties and particularly the Palestinians. I have already mentioned the work of TULIP.

Australia and Australians are well placed to offer knowledge, expertise and assistance in a number of key areas of civic improvement to facilitate or enhance the prospects of a viable Palestinian State, whether it be by: assisting workers to develop active and vibrant trade unions; assisting with the development of a legal system to supplement or replace the myriad layers of legal systems that more or less operate in what will become Palestine; providing assistance and advice concerning sustainable farming practices, water conservation, health care, education, sport and in any number of like areas.

The Labor Government has increased its monetary aid and assistance to the Palestinian Authority. The Government, the ALP and the ACTU might now consider getting more directly involved in these critically important nation building activities in an attempt to inspire sorely needed confidence and trust to give the peace when it comes, as I believe it will, a real prospect of succeeding.

Robert M Goot AM SC
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