

Speech to Trade Union and Labor Forum – Parliament of Queensland,
Brisbane, Wednesday 11 November 2009.

Thank you, David. And thank you for organizing this important event.

A wise statesman once said that in the Middle East common sense always prevails - after all the other alternatives have been exhausted. I believe that a two-State solution is the common sense option because it is the only option that offers even a possibility of doing justice to both sides. But I also believe we still have some way to go before all of the non-common-sense alternatives have been exhausted.

I'd like to begin by outlining some of the basic realities that form the backdrop to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The territory of Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have a combined area that is just under half the size of Tasmania. But whereas Tasmania has lots of rainfall and good soil, more than half of Israel is a desert. And whereas Tasmania has a population of half a million mainly European people, Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have a combined population of ten and a half million people - about 5½ million Jews and 5 million Palestinians, Bedouin and other groups.

Not many people understand or talk about the raw human emotions that lie at the core of the conflict. But they have to be addressed. Contrary to popular belief, it is not all about hatred or religious fanaticism, although those elements are undoubtedly present. The deeper drivers of this conflict, in my opinion, are a combination of fear and hope.

The fear is not a baseless, irrational fear. It is a fear that is all too realistic and grounded in human experience, the fear that each national group, Jews and Palestinians, have of being dominated by the other group. Far from being unique to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, this fear is virtually universal.

It's the same fear, for example, that the Kurds have of being dominated by the Turks, the Tibetans by the Chinese, the Tamils by the Sinhalese and the Irish by the English and the same fear that caused the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union and even the peaceful former Czechoslovakia. No national collectivity willingly agrees to place its future in the hands of another national collectivity.

And that brings me to the hope. Every national group aspires to have a place that is reserved for its own language and culture to have full and free expression, untrammelled by the need to accommodate the sensibilities of other groups. It is no coincidence that the Israeli national anthem is entitled "The Hope". And the hope is, and I am quoting from the anthem, to once again be "a free people in our own land". That is not a difficult aspiration to understand. I'm sure it is an aspiration that is shared by the Palestinians. They too want to be a free people in their own land. I have no quarrel with that at all. It is a universal aspiration.

In recent years, it has become fashionable to deride and belittle nationalism as a relic of the past, as a producer of conflict. But that is very much a western attitude. Those who lead the charge against nationalism, tend to belong to national groups whose sovereignty has never been denied or under challenge. It's a bit like a rich person who tells you that "money isn't important". Well, money tends to be extremely important for those who don't have it. So it is with national sovereignty. People need to have it and enjoy it for a while before they can cease to be *preoccupied* with it.

Something like the European principle of political sovereignty and economic union offers the best prospects for resolving the Israel-Palestinian conflict. I am referring to two independent, politically sovereign states – Israel and Palestine - that eventually operate in an economic union with one another, and perhaps with other states as well, just as the United Nations General Assembly recommended 62 years ago. By respecting the sovereignty of each national group, a two-state solution is the only option that has any chance of meeting the basic fears and hopes of both people and opening up avenues of co-operation in economic, cultural, scientific and other areas.

A two-state solution necessarily means an end to Israel's occupation of at least 93% of the West Bank. That part of the West Bank on which the major settlements are located close to the 1967 Green line – 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.

Both states would have ethnic and religious minority groups within them, but not in such numbers as to threaten the sovereignty of either national group. And it will be imperative that individual members of minority groups in each state will have equal civil, religious and voting rights and equal legal status to individual members of the majority group.

There would clearly also have to be arrangements for sharing sovereignty in Jerusalem so that the predominantly Arab areas in East Jerusalem become part of the Palestinian state and so that sovereignty is also shared over the Temple Mount or Haram Al Sharif.

In my view, the question of refugees is the most ticklish issue as it plays directly into the basic fears about which I spoke earlier. Only a handful of the original 1948 refugees are still left alive today and clearly their needs can and should be accommodated. According to UNWRA, their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren do not themselves fall within the definition of refugees and therefore different considerations apply to them. I think that this issue needs to be thought through and unpacked in much more detail than has hitherto been the case.

I have not even touched on water-sharing, demilitarization or the Fatah-Hamas split. Despite the complexities, on at least four occasions now senior figures from both sides have laid out the foundations for a comprehensive peace settlement, all of which follow the same contours I have outlined.

What's important, however, is that the establishment of a Palestinian state is part of a comprehensive peace settlement between the two peoples and does not merely mark the start of the next phase of the conflict between them. That would truly be a tragedy.