

My Country

Edgar Prais

I am an Israeli citizen flitting by the hour between embarrassment and despair, sympathy and outrage as I watch my adopted country's conduct during the intifada No. 2.

I must of course, eschew the sort of temptation to pontificate which all too often imbues putative commentators with the chutzpah to imagine that an overnight or weekend visit warrants the authorship of a definitive guidebook or manual. Corstorphine is (not yet) the West Bank. Distance distils. Objectivity omits emotion. Personal views are no more than that, enjoying no monopoly, producing no panacea. There is no answer to the resident of Netanya, Haifa or Rishon le Zion who points out that the proof of the pudding affects his or her stomach and not mine. I can visualise a future; Israelis will have to live through the real thing. It's a kind of pure versus applied scenario.

And yet Israelis are asking for the moon (as well) if they expect only extra territorial applause, failing which, silence. Do Jews have and express views? Is the Pope a Catholic? Israel enjoys and benefits from existential support throughout the Diaspora. What it cannot take for granted is the kind of universal love, which is blind to any fault. Criticism, as well as praise, is inevitably going to be on offer.

As a Jew, as an Israeli, as a close and regular – if too often bemused – observer of the Middle East, I cannot imagine why I should be precluded from speaking what I call my mind. If I'm wrong, misguided, foolish, naïve – well, all I can say is "Not again". What I will not and cannot accept is either that it's none of my business or that I am an anti-Semite. I shall leave that to the totalitarians (whoever they might be) to wave the banners of "my country/people, right or wrong".

I came back yesterday (May 12) from my second visit to Israel this year. I have close family there, I know quite a few Israelis, and I speak and read the language after a fashion, on top of all of which I participated

this time in a conference attended by some thousand Israeli "professionals". Come to think of it, I even had the traditional conversation with a taxi driver (no, he was not from New York). What follow are the impressions I have gleaned and the conclusions I have drawn as a result of my exposure to the phenomenon that is Israel – or perhaps more accurately, that is the Israeli. What I don't do is anecdotes. Nor do I do thrillers, so there's no room for suspense.

I have concluded that the right wing is flying the Israeli bird, with its left counterpart contributing little more than the occasional feeble flap. Inevitably that means that what are being described are ever decreasing circles – up which part of its anatomy that bird may eventually disappear, I'll leave to your imagination. Just as there is no sense of direction, there is also no truly long-term vision. Solutions so-called, are for tomorrow. Symptoms matter; underlying causes must at best wait. Truth is thought to emanate from the end of the barrel. That Israel is going through hell is an understatement; that terrorism wreaks havoc is obvious; that strong reactions are natural is indisputable. What does follow is that politics has to take the form of a tank. May 12 is when I came home. It's also the day when Likud returned to its true home, a fortress with no space for Palestinian neighbours.

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Israel's politics has become the politics of the fait accompli. Take it or leave it. Any colour as long as it's blue and white. What worries me above all is that that approach does represent the democratic wish of the large majority (and I was the one who earlier denounced the totalitarians). Just when leadership is essential, populist demagoguery prevails. Israelis have the leaders they deserve, not those they need. Negotiation is a dirty word. Sexy concepts are barriers and buses (to transfer the Palestinians). Particularly chilling is the treatment meted out to those who dissent. Yaffa Yarkoni, for decades an Israeli entertainment icon, faces death threats and virtual exile for questioning current policy. A professor speaking at the conference I mentioned earlier was jeered and catcalled for suggesting that occupation was in conflict with human rights. A prize-winning lawyer, addressing a dinner held partly in her honour, caused a mass walkout by having the audacity to challenge the law's handling of Palestinians.

Freedom of expression amounts to very little when exercised in an empty hall. Parents of children at a Haifa school saw fit to go to court to attempt (mercifully, without success) to interdict a performance by the pupils of the musical "Hair", not because it was rude or condoned drugs but because it favoured draft refusal in the Vietnam context and could be interpreted as relevant to the present Israeli situation. What next – book burning?

I wish I could claim surprise at the discovery that Israeli society does on occasion exhibit something of a shortfall in the tolerance department. It is, I feel, a little difficult to view the country as a functioning melting pot. Certainly, it contains as varied a population mix as could be expected of any destination reached by refugees and immigrants from every quarter of the globe.

And yet the catalyst that it must have been hoped Zionism would constitute has singularly failed to produce the desired reaction. Jews they may all be but some are white, some are black, there are Russians, Ethiopians, Moroccans, Hungarians (my mother-in law even after fifty years), Americans, Poles, Lithuanians and.... divisions persist both socially and politically. My father-in-law (and this may be hard to credit) preferred a Scot to a Sephardi from anywhere. Needless to say no map of the fissures criss-crossing Israeli Society (and hence it's politics) is complete without the thick lines separating the religious from the secular.

Diversity can be glorious but that needs mutual understanding and co-operation. Without practical tolerance diversity very quickly amounts to division and dispute. Regrettably, Israel continues to be living proof of precisely that danger. Nowhere is that phenomenon more pronounced than in politics – except perhaps in the sphere of religion. Political parties tend to reflect rigidly sectional interests – Russian immigrants, Israeli Arabs, Moroccans, North African religious groups, Ashkenazi religious groups, settlers, secularists and so on and so on. Rivalry among parties all too rarely relates to political ideology (hence national unity governments can arise when sectional interests are deemed best served

by sharing power with political opponents) but far more generally emanated from the total rejection of whatever it is in the background and approach which renders any group distinctive. What counts is not what people think but who they are and

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from where they come. That is an attitude which even applies to the dispute between the religious and the secular; no attempt is made to distinguish among differences within these generic camps – simple attachment to one group or the other suffices. Tolerance of nuances is non-existent. By far the most stormy not to say violent session at last week's conference was on the subject of religious versus secular influence on the state. All the speakers were simply shouted down by their opponents in the audience. Free speech was mugged. No argument was allowed to be heard, let alone assessed. I

am no fan of Karl Popper but I couldn't help thinking of "The Open Society and its Enemies". It is in precisely this kind of setting that one has to look for tolerance of minority views on the current crisis - and one looks in vain. Do you know that one of the conference speakers suggested that lawyers apposed to government policy should not be permitted to plead cases in court.

To compound those differences, which arise out of a lack of tolerance, the less than popular left and centre-left have been deserted by those who should be leading them. The leader of the Labour Party is Sharon's Defence Minister; Shimon Peres is his Foreign Minister. If I didn't know better, I could almost be cynical about politicians. This is a vacuum, which has all too readily been hovered up by the right.

Israel is not a monolith and, knowing Israelis as we all do, is never likely to become one. What it is however, is decidedly lopsided. The fear has to be that it will topple over and crush all faint hopes of peace. One last (true) story. Years ago in Italy I met a charming Israeli medical student. When I saw him this year, he is now a consultant; the former liberal and active member of "Doctors for Human Rights" had become a Sharon supporter, favouring Palestinian transfer. He can no longer face the prospect of premature deaths of his three children. I have little right to take issue with him. I only regret that he is being offered no realistic political choice, that the alternatives are being portrayed either as victory through strength or as abject surrender. The intifada's ultimate victim is compromise.

Fine, I've blamed just about everybody – but not quite everybody. I want to add at least two more people to the list; they are you and me. Where the Israelis are surely right and we are wrong is that they do (over there) and we talk (over here). Remember that bit about all evil needs to succeed is for good people to do nothing.

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