

Flying a Kite

Dear Readers,

I'd like first of all to thank those who responded to my message in the last Bulletin. There was general acceptance that it was sensible to send the Bulletin by email where possible, thereby reducing our costs, and this is helpful because our financial position remains precarious. But on the big issue of where we go from here, I have to say there was for the most part a clanging silence. We all agree that we want to support the Palestinians, but have no very clear idea about how to go about doing so. To myself I argue that all campaigns go through the doldrums and that it is those which persevere which win through in the end. Once the final status negotiations are over, I tell myself, everything will become clear. But I am not wholly convinced and often ask myself whether I am wasting energy which could be put to better use.

My visit to Palestine-Israel at the beginning of March was an attempt to resolve these doubts for myself. I had not been there for twenty-three years and was shocked by what I knew very well, but saw for the first time; the ubiquity of settlements, the brutal methods used by the Palestinian security services, the cattle-like crossing points to the Gaza Strip and Bethlehem, by contrast the great freedom to move about enjoyed by PA officials, and last, but not least, Jewish-Israeli arrogance or indifference. There were some hopeful signs as well; the plethora of Palestinian, Jewish-Israeli and one or two Palestinian-Israeli NGOs working for a fairer future. A number of points stood out for me in all this. Firstly there was the growing realisation that the PA is in danger of becoming as much a part of the problem as the Israeli establishment. Secondly there was the uncomfortable recognition that it is difficult to hate ordinary Jewish-Israelis for saying appalling things when you know that they are also victims of a system which has put them where they are. And thirdly there was the feeling I gained from those NGO members I spoke to that their emphasis is on human rights and justice rather than on nationalism. While many liberal Jewish-Israelis would like Palestinians to become as chauvenist as themselves, because this would justify their own behaviour, I saw little enthusiasm on the Palestinian side for such an attitude. (I confess this is what I wanted to see, so you may need to adjust my view in this light.)

Now this is where I want to fly a kite. For to me the real problem in Palestine-Israel is the manipulation of mythological national identities by powerful élites, the Zionist-American establishment on the one side, and increasingly a Palestinian junta on the other. The danger of the present situation, as I see it, is that a powerful Israeli-Palestinian axis will establish itself subordinating the ordinary population, both Jewish and non-Jewish, to its own fantasies. Curiously I have come to this conclusion not via Marxism (with which it has much in common), but via psychology. I work as a psychotherapist and have become increasingly interested in the question of identity. It seems to me that human powerlessness leads people to identify in groups, and that this tendency puts immense power in the hands of those individuals/élites who are clever and charismatic enough to manipulate it. They do this by inventing myths. Hence a Herzl derives a fantasy of invulnerability for himself by constructing the myth of modern political Zionism, but at the expence of those whom he manipulates. Who knows what fantasies are already brewing among the Palestinian élite? Whatever they are, they are unlikely to benefit the ordinary people.

All this leaves me with a pretty radical proposal which I realise will not be acceptable to all. I feel that Palestine Solidarity Campaign has, as a concept, lost its sense of purpose since Oslo and Wye. I would like to propose instead, in this millenium year, a phoenix-like rebirth from the fertile ashes of the old. It might be called: *Justice for Palestine-Israel and its Refugees (JPIR)*. We would make it quite clear in our aims that the expression 'Palestine-Israel' in no way implies recognition of the concept of an exclusive Jewish state, nor of the division of Palestine into Jewish and Palestinian areas. It does, however, show that we do not deny current realities. The specific inclusion of the refugee issue would ensure that the Palestinians living outside Palestine-Israel are not ignored, a very real danger as I see it.

Once again I ask for your feedback. A vital and democratic organisation must involve its membership both in discussion and in active work, otherwise it will die. We have far too little of either at present. We have arranged an EGM to debate and ratify a new constitution on 6 May. If it is the members' wish, we could turn this into a really vibrant discussion about our future, based on which we would be in a better position to decide on the constitution. How we proceed can be decided on the day, but it would be good to have your views before then. If anyone wants to talk to me personally, please feel free to call me on 01273 602168; if I'm not at home and you leave a message I will call you back.

Best wishes,
Francis Clark-Lowes