

Will Israel lose the peace?

ISRAEL'S INCURSION into Lebanon may paradoxically lose Israel the propaganda war with the Palestinians, such has been the reaction around the world to Israeli bombing of Beirut. Even the Australian Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, certainly no foe of Israel's, felt constrained to make a tough statement against Israel's actions, calling them "short sighted and foolish".

Mr Fraser said that there could be no military solution to the Palestinian problem, and that Israel's actions were making it difficult for her friends to maintain their support. He urged the United States to use its influence to bring the fighting to an end.

Fraser called for a "comprehensive" change in Israel's approach to the Palestinians, concluding that "our support for Israel in the past gives us not only the right but the responsibility to speak our mind bluntly and honestly".

The Prime Minister's statement came not before time, though predictably it did not please members of Australia's various Zionist organisations.

Several questions need to be separated in this debate. Firstly, Zionism needs to be carefully and honestly distinguished from Judaism. Zionism is a political movement, with which many Jews themselves disagree; Judaism is a religious and cultural tradition, and one of profound significance for the world. To confuse the two, as some indeed do, is to risk staking the future of Judaism on one fragile political movement. Nothing would be more likely to lead to a revival of anti-Semitism than such a confusion.

Here Jews might learn from the mistakes Catholics made last century in thinking that the political structures of the Papal States were essential to the Church; in Italy, political differences on the question were often transformed into anti-clericalism. Jews face a similar danger if the distinction between Zionism and Judaism is not kept clear.

Secondly, Zionism as a political movement can claim no supernatural or



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mystical sanction for whatever it does. It is entirely proper for it to be judged on its intrinsic merits, just as any other political movement is. The criteria for making such a judgement involve questions of human rights and justice in society.

At first sight it is surprising that few Jews in Australia have been willing to publicly criticise Israeli action in Lebanon on these issues, as have prominent Jews overseas. But, to continue our previous example, many Catholics were loathe to criticise their Church's stand on the Papal States publicly last century, lest it be interpreted as disloyalty to the religious community. Within Australia's relatively small Jewish community, similar sentiments would be quite understandable.

What must be firmly rejected is the use made of certain fundamentalist Christian sects, which interpret Israeli actions as the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy. This entirely avoids consideration of the justice of Israeli policies. Religious Jews themselves should be the first to condemn such cynical misuse of the Old Testament, for they know how strongly the prophets insisted on justice as the criterion for God's blessing.

Thirdly, the questions of terrorism, the PLO and the Palestine people as a whole must be clearly distinguished. Mr Fraser rightly condemned the use of terror as a political weapon. However, the PLO cannot be entirely dismissed as a terrorist organisation, since it has fulfilled many of the functions of a government in exile for the Palestinians. And it is the Palestinian people who have suffered most from this trauma: expelled from their homeland by

the Israelis, they have been used as political pawns by the Arab powers; now they are used as a human shield by the PLO.

There is a strange irony here, that Sharon and Begin are berating the PLO for terrorism in much the same way as the British and main-stream Zionists once berated Begin and Sharon in the days when they fought for the extremists, killing British peace-keeping forces and innocent Palestinians in reprisal raids. The dismissal of the PLO as simply a terrorist organisation would carry more credibility if it came from a modern-day Ben-Gurion, rather than Begin or Sharon.

The point to be made is that the question of terrorism is not a simple one, but is bound up with the historical legacy of injustice and oppression and with judgments about the range of alternative courses of action which can help remove such injustices.

Few would deny that the elimination of the military wing of the PLO in Lebanon may have good results for peace in Lebanon; the consequences of Israeli action may be good, even if the means were bad and lacking proportionality. But Israel may yet lose the peace unless it can come to a political settlement which both the Palestinians and the Lebanese peoples find acceptable. Continued social injustice and deprivation will merely spawn more PLOs.

What has so scandalised the western world is not the fact that Mr Sharon disobeys the Israel Cabinet and bombards Beirut on his own initiative; nor the fact that Israel can defy the United States. What is most disturbing is that Israel has lost its claim to operate on a higher morality. Its ruthless realpolitik in shelling Beirut has made it embrace the doctrine of the end justifying the means. You can kill many innocent people to kill a few of your enemy.

The issue was dramatised by Mr Avraham Burg, the son of the Israeli Interior Minister, when he and four other officers from combat units presented a petition of 2000 signatures to Mr Sharon recently, demanding his resignation and an enquiry into the conduct of the war. "What is happening is beyond all proportion", he said. "If there were a large number of Jews in Tyre or Sidon and terrorists were hiding out among them, the Israeli Defence Board would in no way shell them and would look for other ways to get them out". Are innocent Lebanese lives worth less than those of Israelis?

Of course, if the end is to justify the means, then Israel need have no scruple about using cluster bombs or phosphorus bombs either.

What made Israel special in the past was its claim as a homeland for a persecuted people. Now it is the Palestinians who appear to be the persecuted people looking for a homeland. Current Israeli policies should profoundly disturb all Jews and friends of Israel. ■

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