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## Left behind on building bridges

Nick Dyrenfurth and Philip Mendes | The Australian | 13 May

In light of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's predictable hate speech, Australia's belated decision to boycott the UN-sponsored conference on racism dubbed Durban II was completely vindicated. Nonetheless, Durban II allowed Ahmadinejad another forum to promote his ugly view that Israel should be eliminated, and peddle tired conspiracy theories concerning international Zionist influence.

Even more regrettably, here in Australia, there was an attempt to legitimise his stance. Responding to Australia's boycott decision, many on the one-state solution anti-Israel Left mirrored his predictable allegation that Australia's decision (and that of other Western countries) was driven by the machinations of the powerful Zionist/Jewish lobby, desperate to shield Israel from criticism.

Afterwards, some left-wing commentators, including Crikey's Guy Rundle, who ostensibly supports a two-state solution, argued that Ahmadinejad's speech was less controversial than had been claimed, at the same time sheeting home most of the blame for the ongoing conflict on Israel.

It might surprise many to learn that this division between Jews and sections of the Left is a relatively recent one. For a long time, Jews - especially Australian Jewry - were regarded as naturally left-wing or progressive supporters. For instance, ALP leader Bert "Doc" Evatt, president of the UN General Assembly in 1948-49, led negotiations that resulted in the creation of Israel. Those further to the left, including the Communist Party, were even more vigorous in demanding immediate Australian recognition of Israel. Prominent Left intellectuals such as Jim Cairns and Manning Clark and radical union leaders such as Clarrie O'Shea and Jim Healy signed petitions supporting the Jewish state. Not surprisingly, 75 per cent of Melbourne Jews polled in 1947 voiced support for the ALP.

This alliance began to fracture following the 1967 war and Israel's subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Today, Left support for Israel is, regrettably, far more tenuous. Of course the Left itself is a complex beast. Most ALP-aligned social democrats have stood firmly, although not uncritically, behind Israel. The ideological Left - located within some militant unions, sections of the Greens, largely irrelevant far left-wing sects and in parts of academe - has shifted to an immovable hardline, pro-Palestinian position.

The old Australian Left, such as the great economic historian and civil libertarian Brian Fitzpatrick, would have been surprised by this turn of events. Fitzpatrick would have probably described himself as a Marxist; though a one-time ALP member, he was a communist sympathiser. Yet during the 1940s this did not prevent him from doing all within his powers to fight the scourge of anti-Semitism, firstly through his Australian Council for Civil Liberties highlighting the ill-treatment of Jewish refugees, and when the time came, actively supporting the creation of an independent Israeli state.

Modern Australian progressives could learn a lot from his example. If Australian progressives are truly committed to a peaceful Middle East and a viable two-state solution, as most social democrats are, they must openly support Israel. But this does not mean uncritical friendship.

Far from it.

Despite the quasi-conspiratorial and unhelpful arguments of professional Israel-basher Antony Loewenstein, the Australian Jewish community holds quite divergent views on the above issues. As the old-saying goes, for every two Jews you'll find three different opinions. Indeed, many Jews who support the existence of Israel are quite vocal, and deservedly so, when it comes to criticising Israel's West Bank settlement policies.

Rather, progressives should steadfastly support a peaceful two-state solution based on staple social democratic values: co-operation, compassion and solidarity. These values must be accorded to both sides. To do so is to explicitly reject the false dichotomy of being pro-Israel/anti-Palestinian and vice versa fostered by extremists on both sides of the political divide. This means promoting dialogue with Israelis and Jews who reject the Greater Israel project, and with moderate Palestinians and Arabs who reject demands for a coerced return of millions of Palestinian refugees to Green Line Israel which would result in the immediate or gradual dissolution of the state of Israel.

Most importantly, along with such support, commonsense progressives must speak up against the bigoted attacks of political extremists here in Australia and abroad. Frankly, it is hard to imagine any reasonable Australian, whether progressive, conservative or anywhere in between, not being appalled by Ahmadinejad's revolting calls for Israel to be wiped off the map. But if there is one recent furphy progressives should vocally object to it is the quite disgraceful slur on Israel doing the rounds of the hard-left and parts of academe. Apparently Israel is an apartheid state founded on the principles of colonialism and racism, if not a genocidal impulse to exterminate the Palestinian people.

There is so much wrong with this vile argument that it is difficult to know where to begin. It is deeply ironic that it is being peddled by activists ostensibly interested in peace, yet must inexorably sow the seeds of further division and hatred. As the signatories to a recent Stanford University Scholars for Middle East Peace open letter suggest: "To equate Israel with apartheid displays a profound ignorance of the horror that was South Africa as well as contempt for democracy in Israel."

That, perhaps, is the reason above all why progressives should support Israel. As a liberal democracy in a sea of dictatorships, it shares common bloodlines which are the basis for social democratic politics, such as freedom of association and speech, equality for women and tolerance of sexual diversity. Moreover, if we value institutions such as free trade unions in our country then we must make sure they are respected abroad. It is of course the presence of a social democrat in the White House that may potentially act as circuit-breaker in the stalled peace process. While we should be careful not to turn US President Barack Obama into some messiah figure, the opportunities for peace under his presidency are immense, despite the unfortunate accession to power of Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing coalition in Israel.

Jews, Muslims, Christians and ordinary people the world over are praying for progress in the Middle East. Progressives and moderates, whether in Israel, Australia or the Arab world have a vitally important role to play. The simplest, most practical act may be simply bringing the two sides closer together as advocated by the recently formed Trade Unions Linking Israel and Palestine. Those demonising, or standing silently by while Israel is libeled, can only help perpetuate the conflict.

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## **Mideast's Christians declining in influence**

Ethan Bronner | *The New York Times* | 12 May

Christians used to be a vital force in the Middle East. They dominated Lebanon and filled top jobs in the Palestinian movement. In Egypt, they were wealthy beyond their number. In Iraq, they packed the universities and professions. Across the region, their orientation was a vital link to the West, a counterpoint to prevailing trends.

But as Pope Benedict XVI wends his way across the Holy Land this week, he is addressing a dwindling and threatened Christian population driven to emigration by political violence, lack of economic opportunity and the rise of radical Islam. A region that a century ago was 20 percent

Christian is about 5 percent today and dropping.

Since it was here that Jesus walked and Christianity was born, the papal visit highlights a prospect many consider deeply troubling for the globe's largest faith, adhered to by a third of humanity — its most powerful and historic shrines could become museum relics with no connection to those who live among them.

"I fear the extinction of Christianity in Iraq and the Middle East," the Rev. Jean Benjamin Sleiman, the Catholic archbishop of Baghdad, said in a comment echoed across the region.

The pope, in a Mass on Tuesday at the foot of the Mount of Olives, addressed "the tragic reality" of the "departure of so many members of the Christian community in recent years." He said: "While understandable reasons lead many, especially the young, to emigrate, this decision brings in its wake a great cultural and spiritual impoverishment to the city. Today I wish to repeat what I have said on other occasions: in the Holy Land there is room for everyone!"

On Sunday in Jordan the pope argued that Christians had a role here in reconciliation, that their very presence eased the strife, and that the decline of that presence could help to increase extremism. When the mix of beliefs and lifestyles goes down, orthodoxy rises, he implied, as does uniformity of the cultural landscape in a region where tolerance is not an outstanding virtue.

A Syrian international aid worker said, "When other Arabs find out that I am Christian, many seem shocked to discover that you can be both an Arab and a Christian." The worker asked to remain anonymous so as not to bring attention to his faith.

The Middle East is now, of course, overwhelmingly Muslim. Except for Israel, with its six million Jews, there is no country where Islam does not prevail. This includes Lebanon, where Christians now amount to a quarter of the population, and the non-Arab countries of Iran and Turkey.

Local Christians are torn between sounding the alarm and staying mum, unsure whether attention will reduce the problem or aggravate it by driving out those who remain.

With Islam pushing aside nationalism as the central force behind the politics of identity, Christians who played important roles in various national struggles find themselves left out. And since Islamic culture, especially in its more fundamental stripes, often defines itself in contrast to the West, Christianity has in some places been relegated to an enemy — or least foreign — culture.

"Unless there is a turn toward secularism in the Arab world, I don't think there is a future for Christians here," said Sarkis Naoum, a Christian columnist for the Lebanese newspaper *Al Nahar*.

Just as some opponents of President Obama sought to defame him by claiming he was a Muslim, so in Turkey was President Abdullah Gul accused of having Christian origins. Mr. Gul won a court case last December against a member of Parliament who made the accusation.

A century ago there were millions of Christians in what is today Turkey; now there are 150,000. There is a house in Turkey where the Virgin Mary is believed to have spent her last days, yet the country's National Assembly and military have no Christian members or officers except temporary recruits doing mandatory service. Violence against Christians has risen.

Among Palestinians, Islam is also playing an unprecedented role in defining identity, especially in Gaza, ruled by Hamas. Benedict's arrival in Jerusalem on Monday prompted a radical member of the legislature in Gaza to call on Arab governments not to greet him because of his contentious remark in 2006 regarding the Prophet Muhammad.

The West Bank Palestinian leadership, more secular, tries to include Christians to ward off separatist sentiments and stop the population decline. It has been a losing battle. In 1948, Jerusalem was about one-fifth Christian. Today it is 2 percent. Rafiq Hussein, the chief of staff of President Mahmoud Abbas's office, said of the exodus of Christians: "It is a very negative thing if it continues to happen. Our task, from the president downwards, is to keep the presence of the

Christians alive and well.”

In Bethlehem, where the Church of the Nativity marks where Jesus is said to have been born, Christians now make up barely a third of the population after centuries of being 80 percent of it. Emigration is the first option for anyone who has the opportunity, and there are large communities of Christian émigrés throughout the West to absorb them.

“Economy, economy, economy,” said Fayez Khano, 63, a member of the Assyrian community, explaining the reasons for the continuing exodus while cutting olive-wood figurines in his family workshop on Manger Street. Mr. Khano’s three adult children live in Dublin, and since business is slow he and his wife are about to go to Dublin for six months.

The story has been similar in Iraq. Of the 1.4 million Christians there at the time of the American invasion in 2003, nearly half have fled, according to American government reports and local Iraqi Christians. Many left early in the war when they were attacked for working with the Americans, but the exodus gained speed when Christians became targets in Iraq’s raging sectarian war. Churches were bombed, and priests as well as lay Christians were murdered. As recently as March 2008, an archbishop was kidnapped and killed outside the northern city of Mosul.

And in Egypt, where 10 percent of the country is Coptic Christian, the prevalent religious discourse has drifted from what was considered to be a moderate Egyptian Islam toward a far less tolerant Saudi-branded Islam.

In Saudi Arabia, churches are illegal. In the rest of the Persian Gulf region, Christians are foreign workers without the prospect of citizenship.

The decline of the Christian population and voice in the region is not only a source of concern for Christians, but for broadminded Muslims as well.

“Here in Lebanon, Muslims will often tell you Lebanon is no good without the Christians, and they mean it,” said Kemal Salibi, a historian. “The mix of religions and cultures that makes this place so tolerant would disappear.”

## **Pope Benedict blunders spoil what should have been a healing tour**

John Lyons | *The Australian* | 14 May

**Given the sensitivity of a visit by any pope to the Holy Land, Benedict is being badly let down by some of his advisers and speechwriters.**

This could have been one of the finest moments for this Pope, stamping out his own sense of leadership as head of the world’s 1.1 billion Catholics.

Instead, one badly written speech and one badly handled media issue have wasted much of the effort the Pope is putting into trying to engage the two other major monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam.

The Pope deserves credit for coming to the Holy Land. That in itself takes some courage - some of the problems he is confronting could well explain why he has rejected so many previous invitations to come here and why previous pontiffs have kept as far away from the place as possible.

But having had the courage to arrive in the land of the ancient feud he - or his advisers - should have kept a couple of things in mind.

The fact that Pope Benedict - Josef Ratzinger - is German adds sensitivity to a visit to Israel, a nation whose identity is formed largely from the horrors of the Holocaust and a determination that such atrocities should never again happen to the Jewish people. The view of Israelis is palpable: World War II showed that when the horror begins they cannot rely on anyone else, so from now on

they're going to rely on themselves.

Further sensitivity is added to this Pope's trip by the fact he was in the Hitler Youth. Now it's widely accepted, even in Israel, that he did not join by choice - that any youth in Germany at the time was required to join.

All this was eminently manageable. But add another layer of sensitivity on to the visit - that in January this year the Pope overturned the excommunication of a bishop who was a Holocaust denier - and things start getting trickier.

It was against a backdrop of these three sensitivities that Israelis waited with a certain suspicion for the Pope. It's not that they didn't make him feel welcome, but when it came to the Holocaust, they needed to hear certain words. What they really needed to hear was that he condemns Holocaust denial. Holocaust denial, after all, is anti-Semitism at its most vicious.

Instead, he stood at Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial and did not mention or condemn Holocaust deniers. He said may the "suffering" of Holocaust victims never be denied, but he did not address those who deny it ever even happened.

I sat inside the Hall of Remembrance on Monday and watched the speech.

It seemed cold and impersonal. Yad Vashem is a place that you feel deep inside you - it is impossible to visit without gaining a sense of the horrors. Whoever wrote the speech for the Pope should have arrived in Israel a day earlier and walked around Yad Vashem for a couple of hours. To make a speech about the Holocaust, in front of an audience that has lost so many of their families, without mentioning the Nazis is extraordinary.

Israeli historian Tom Segev tapped into this national mood: "There is nothing easier than expressing real horror when talking about the Holocaust, than identifying with its suffering, pain and grief. If that is not done, it is a sign that there was a deliberate decision not to do so."

In a similar visit in 2000, according to someone who was there, Pope John Paul II held the audience spellbound when he talked about seeing the rise of Nazism. Yet here was a German Pope who had seen it at much closer quarters, talking without a hint of personal feeling or observation.

Israelis were deeply disappointed. But then it got worse - next day his spokesman, Federico Lombardi, told the media that the Pope had "never, never, never" been in Hitler Youth. When the media pointed out that in a 1996 book the Pope talked about the Hitler Youth, Lombardi was forced to retract the claim. The fact that on day three of a visit to Israel the Pope's spokesman is having to tell the media the Pope "opposed Nazi ideology" amounts to a dreadful failure of a trip that could have been one of history's great healing missions.

## The 70th anniversary of the British White Paper

Rafal Medoff | The Jerusalem Post | 12 May

Chaim Weizmann called it "a death sentence for the Jewish people." David Ben-Gurion said it was "the greatest betrayal perpetrated by the government of a civilized people in our generation." Seventy years ago this week, England declared a new policy for Palestine: Jewish immigration would be restricted to just 15,000 annually for the next five years, and after that would be permitted only with the agreement of Palestine's Arabs.

Just six months after the Kristallnacht pogrom, with German Jews desperately seeking a haven and country after country shutting its doors, the British closed off the one land that offered the hope of refuge.

Weizmann rushed to London to plead his case before prime minister Neville Chamberlain. "The prime minister sat before me like a marble statue; his expressionless eyes were fixed on me, but he never said a word," Weizmann later recalled. "I got no response. He was bent on appeasement of

the Arabs and nothing could change his course." Well, maybe not quite nothing.

The British were, after all, in a particularly vulnerable position in May 1939. Two months earlier, Hitler had completed his dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, leaving the Munich agreement in tatters. War with England seemed inevitable. "London was in such dire need of American support," the historian Selig Adler has noted, "that a strong dissent from Washington would have probably forced a British reversal" of the White Paper.

American Zionists thought likewise. In the weeks before the publication of the White Paper, US Zionist leaders repeatedly urged President Franklin Roosevelt to intervene against the anticipated British action. The Jews closest to FDR, Justice Louis Brandeis and Rabbi Stephen Wise, begged the president to step in. Roosevelt tended to deflect these kinds of requests with a dose of charm. Calling Wise "Stevie" made the American Jewish Congress leader feel he was a personal friend of the most powerful man on earth. "The president glad-handed Zionist leaders," Prof. Adler recalled. "He would pacify his Jewish visitors with promises... but then failed to put these pledges into the executive pipeline."

TO BE SURE, Roosevelt was not happy about the rumoured new British policy on Palestine. He instructed the State Department to inform London that the US hoped "no drastic changes" were in the offing. In a memo to secretary of state Cordell Hull on the day the White Paper was issued, FDR called it "something that we cannot give approval to." But there is a huge difference between "not giving approval" and expressing forceful, explicit disapproval. The British took note of Roosevelt's minimalist response and dug their heels in accordingly.

WOULD A DIFFERENT response by FDR have persuaded London to backtrack? An episode from 1936 may be instructive. That summer, the British were preparing to slash Jewish immigration to the Holy Land. Rabbi Wise appealed to Roosevelt to intervene, and with Election Day just a few months off, the president leaned on the British to relent. The restrictions were shelved. As a result, Wise biographer Melvin Urofsky notes, in the next three years, "more than 50,000 Jews, mostly from Germany and Austria, were able to join the Yishuv - men, women and children who would undoubtedly have perished had the 1939 White Paper been issued three years earlier."

It's true that 1939 was not the same as 1936. By 1939, Britain was close to war with Germany and was deeply worried about which side the Arab world would take in such a conflict. Supporters of the White Paper said the restrictions were needed to keep the Arab world from erupting in revolt.

But would there really have been such a serious Arab reaction if Jewish immigration were allowed to continue during the Holocaust years? In her autobiography, Golda Meir characterized British fears of an Arab revolt as wildly exaggerated: "A few Arab leaders might have made threatening speeches. Perhaps there would have been a protest march or two. Maybe there would even have been an additional act or pro-Nazi sabotage somewhere in the Middle East... But thousands more of the 6 million might have survived."

Despite the logic of Meir's argument, the British White Paper went into force. And Roosevelt was silent.

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The history of FDR's response to the persecution of European Jewry is littered with empty promises, unfulfilled hopes and missed opportunities. Seventy years ago this week, one of the most important of those opportunities was squandered, and on the eve of the Holocaust, one of European Jewry's last avenues of escape was almost completely shut off. The consequences were catastrophic.

### Speech by Rev Hon Fred Nile MLC in the Legislative Council Israel (Hansard, 13 May, Page 105)

**Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE** [12.00 a.m.]: Tonight I speak about the celebration to mark the sixty-first anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel, which was formed in 1948, and refer to two special events. The first event was held last Wednesday 6 May 2009 when the Christian Democratic Party sponsored the Christian Worldview Forum in the Jubilee Room, which nearly 100 guests attended. Special guests speakers were Pastor Greg and Judy Willis, who gave an outstanding Bible-based power-point study on Almighty God's everlasting covenants and love for His people and His land, Israel. They took us into both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The power-point presentation showed us God's many miraculous interventions, saving Israel time and again from both individuals and nations who would harm His people. We were reminded of scores of battles, both ancient and modern, where God's hand of protection saved, and will continue to save, His people.

The second function, which was held in Sydney last Thursday 7 May, marked the anniversary of the independence of Israel, which was sponsored by the Jewish community and attended by 400 to 500 guests. The Premier, the Hon. Nathan Rees, and the Ambassador of Israel, who travelled from Canberra, gave speeches. These events reminded us of the ancient and modern history of Israel, such as its nationhood and Jerusalem. Ancient Israel became a nation in 1312BC. Since the Jewish conquest in 1272BC the Jews have had dominion over the land for 1,000 years, with a continuous presence in the land for the past 3,300 years. During that period Jerusalem has always been the Jewish capital. Jerusalem has never been the capital of any Arab or Muslim entity. Even when the Jordanians occupied Jerusalem they never sought to make it their capital, and Arab leaders did not come to visit.

In fact, Jerusalem is mentioned more than 700 times in the Jewish Holy Scriptures. As we know, King David founded the city of Jerusalem. It should also be noted that during the formation of modern Israel in 1948 more than 600,000 Jewish refugees were forced to flee from Arab lands because of the persecution and the pogroms. The majority were assimilated into Israel, although one should bear in mind that Israel is a very small nation, no larger than the State of New Jersey. During the various Arab-Israeli conflicts, the Arabs were represented by eight separate nations; there was only one Jewish nation. These Arab nations initiated all five wars and lost. Israel defended itself each time and won.

Even now the charter of the Palestine Liberation Organization still calls for the destruction of the State of Israel. Israel has given the Palestinians most of the West Bank land, autonomy under the Palestinian Authority, and has supplied them. Under Jordanian rule, Jewish holy sites were desecrated and the Jews were denied access to places of worship. Under Israeli rule all Muslims and Christians sites have been preserved and made accessible to people of all faiths. I note that the majority of resolutions passed by the United Nations are critical of Israel, and that is a disappointment. However, the United Nations was silent when the Jordanians destroyed 58 Jerusalem synagogues. The future of Israel is a serious matter, as the leaders of Iran have just announced that they believe they can totally destroy Israel in 11 days. That statement was made only this week. We need to pray for the people of Israel and pray for peace in Jerusalem.