

Centenary of the Balfour Declaration, 2 November 2017

Commemoration of this controversial document at a national level clearly is going to require visionary leadership - in fact, statesmanship, beyond all domestic party political or financial considerations - and beyond the fears of Foreign Office lawyers.

Governments generally are very happy to commemorate – and celebrate success; extremely reluctant, on the whole, to acknowledge promises broken or unfulfilled – or policies that have led directly to suffering or even genocide. The thorny issue of compensation claims raises its head. It's worth reflecting on our own commemoration in 2007 of the bicentenary of Wilberforce's life and achievement – wonderful as far as it went - but there was no mention by our government of Britain's major role, or responsibility for, the Slave Trade itself. For me, it was a lost opportunity.

On a happier note, and equally significant, who can forget the memorable visit of the Queen to Dublin in May 2011 – the first to the Republic by the monarch. The significance of her gestures and her words during that visit were deeply moving, and have to be measured in the light of the 700 year turbulent history between the British crown and Ireland. Her visit was a vivid demonstration that commemoration, including both celebration and acknowledgement is both hope-giving and creative – and that acknowledgement, in particular, is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of civilisation.

The centenary of the Balfour Declaration in November 2017, will I hope be commemorated appropriately, acknowledging both the Zionist and Palestinian national narratives, and when the origins of the Declaration, the Declaration itself, and its multiple consequences i.e., the salvation and the suffering, will be commemorated by the British government in a forward-looking, even-handed and transparent fashion.

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