

Some speeches from the members business debate “Towards an independent Palestinian state: a Scottish proposal”.
Scottish Parliament Sept 3rd 2019

Palestine

▪ [The Deputy Presiding Officer \(Christine Grahame\):](#)

The final item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S5M-16637, in the name of Claudia Beamish, on “Towards an independent Palestinian state: a Scottish proposal”. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes calls for action towards an independent Palestinian state; recognises Britain’s historical responsibilities in Palestine and Israel and notes the view that British engagement is needed for a better future; acknowledges Scotland’s role in influencing Britain to act for true equality, promoting a policy based on those universal values that Britain helped enshrine in international law; commends the work of the Balfour Project in advancing the education of the British public in the history of Britain’s involvement in the Middle East, and notes calls, including from people in the South Scotland region, for six measures to be taken, which are an end to the closure of Gaza, freedom of worship for all believers, respect for the rule of law, accountability, recognition of the State of Palestine alongside Israel and a UK Government commitment to defend the fundamental rights of both peoples.

▪ [Claudia Beamish \(South Scotland\) \(Lab\):](#)

I am saddened to have to bring my motion to the chamber this afternoon, but I am relieved to have the opportunity to debate the grave situation that has been created for the people of Palestine and commit to supporting a just way forward that benefits Palestinians and Israelis alike.

I thank my colleagues who signed the motion for debate. The motion recognises the historical responsibility of the United Kingdom in Palestine and Israel, and it acknowledges the fundamental role that Scotland, its people and its Government have and can play in promoting principles that are rooted in equality, justice and the rule of law.

To fully grasp the degree to which Britain was involved in the making—or, better said, the unmaking—of the Palestinian state, we must first remember the historical conditions that made it happen. The roots of the conflict date back to the late 19th century, when Palestine was still part of the Ottoman empire, and Jewish nationalism—political Zionism—developed in Europe, largely in response to the pogroms in the Russian empire. We should never forget either the centuries-long history of virulent antisemitism throughout Christian Europe.

In 1917, a statement from the UK Government, formally known as the Balfour declaration, which was driven largely by strategic wartime considerations, turned an aspiration of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine from an idealistic and unrealistic vision into a possibility as Britain publicly pledged to establish a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine.

It is worth remembering that, at that time, there were 600,000 Arabs and only 55,000 Jews living there, most of whom were indigenous and religious, non-Zionist and Arabic speaking. In total, the Jewish community in Palestine owned less than 3 per cent of the land.

At the end of the first world war, Britain became the mandatory power in Palestine and deliberately ignored the clear wishes of the Arab majority, who sought self-rule, in accordance with Britain's responsibility to fulfil the "sacred trust" as specified in the League of Nations mandate.

In 1937, the British Government suggested partitioning Palestine but swiftly abandoned the idea as it was too problematic. By 1939, because of Hitler's persecution of the Jews, the Jewish population in Palestine had risen sharply to about 30 per cent, but they still owned only some 6 per cent of the land.

During the second world war, Jewish militias turned on the British, their former sponsors. Ultimately, in 1947, Britain, which was exhausted militarily and financially, surrendered to Zionist terror and handed the future of Palestine over to the United Nations. We abandoned Palestine, shabbily and shamefully. Zionist militias defeated the Arab armies, expelled most of the Palestinian population—Muslim and Christian—into the surrounding countries and established the state of Israel on 78 per cent of the Palestinian land area.

Sadly and shamefully, as we are all well aware, that still is—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, but I feel emotional about this.

If we had been able to find a solution then, we would not have had to wait 70 years. Surely, we must find one now. Past British responsibility, which still provokes present injustice, demands British involvement in working urgently for a safer and brighter future for all the people in Israel and Palestine.

Only by seeking and achieving equality of rights, peaceful coexistence between the citizens of Israel and Palestine and the right of self-determination equally exercised can there be lasting security. However, lasting security for one people does not come from suppressing the rights of the other.

To achieve those universal values that Britain helped to incorporate into international law, my motion calls for six measures to be taken, as proposed by the Balfour project. The first is an end to the closure of Gaza. I visited Gaza in 2011 with my friend and colleague John Finnie, and what we witnessed then has tragically deteriorated further for those who are struggling to bring up children there.

The second measure is true freedom of worship for all believers—Jews, Muslims and Christians—at their holy sites. East Jerusalem is occupied Palestinian territory, just like the rest of the West Bank and Gaza. That is the Palestinian state of which I speak today.

The third measure is respect for the rule of law. The whole Israeli settler enterprise is illegal under the fourth Geneva convention. Furthermore, the International Court of Justice has issued an advisory opinion regarding the legality of the Israeli wall in the West Bank, concluding that the wall is contrary to international law.

The fourth measure is accountability and consequences for whoever is responsible for continuously breaking international law, without fear or favour.

The fifth is recognition by the United Kingdom Government, and other European states, of the state of Palestine alongside Israel. In order for that to happen, we need a Labour UK Government. I am sure that the Scottish Government is also working for that recognition.

The sixth measure is a UK Government commitment to defend the fundamental rights of both peoples. Free and legitimate movement of goods and people between Gaza and the West Bank is just one of those basic rights. In the Balfour declaration, the British Government pledged to protect the rights of the existing Arab population. Alas, we have broken our promise.

The moment to show our support is now, in the direst of times, with the toxic mix of the Israeli Government's deeply concerning political and military activity and the profoundly detrimental Trump Administration. In two weeks, the people of Israel will vote in a general election. Prime Minister Netanyahu seeks the votes of Israeli settlers by promising to annex the illegal settlements. Such an illegal step poses an existential threat to the policy of two states and equal rights that has been advocated by the British Government and the European Union. Recognition of Palestine and of Palestinian rights is the right way to pre-empt or even prevent that very real threat.

We should make no mistake: annexation is actually a threat to the wellbeing of both peoples. If there are not to be two states, there will effectively be one state and one power. Tragically, that state will be an apartheid state.

I am an optimist. I still believe that there can be peaceful coexistence through mutual recognition and parallel self-determination, but history teaches us that the conflict cannot be resolved by the two parties by themselves; the disparity in power between them is too great. That is why I say that what we do and say here matters. We can act or we can simply watch.

I say that we must act, together, for the good of all. Recognition of Palestine alongside Israel does not delegitimise Israel. It takes nothing away from Israel that belongs to Israel; rather, it serves to confirm Israel's borders and her security. It also serves to establish Palestine's borders and her security, and it affirms the equal rights of two peoples to statehood, each in their own country.

It is my belief—I hope that members will agree—that we must acknowledge the profound challenges ahead, and I ask that we reaffirm today the commitment of the Scottish Parliament to a just solution for the Palestinian and Israeli peoples, acknowledging the work of the Balfour project and committing to working to make the six measures that I have highlighted a reality.

▪ [Sandra White \(Glasgow Kelvin\) \(SNP\):](#)

I congratulate Claudia Beamish, my colleague on the cross-party group on Palestine, on securing the debate and on making such a wonderful, heartfelt speech. I also welcome the people in the public gallery and thank them for their support and the hard work that they have carried out on the Balfour Project, a meeting of which was held here, in Edinburgh. I believe that a book will be produced that will contain submissions to the project, including those from Claudia and me.

Claudia Beamish referred to the history of Palestine. Like many others, I have always been a great believer that we cannot look to our future if we do not know about our past. Claudia gave us a detailed description of the middle east and what has happened to the Palestinian people, so I will not dwell on that.

Having said that, it is important that we recognise a Palestinian state—the subject of the debate—because it was, after all, the British who were responsible for partition. I am proud that many of us in Scotland and throughout the UK support the recognition of a Palestinian state. Claudia Beamish mentioned the British mandate. We know that the Balfour declaration

promised to establish in Palestine a national home for the Jewish people, essentially vowing to give away a country that was not theirs—or ours—to give away. We know what has happened since, and the situation has got worse.

As Claudia Beamish said, in 1947, the British Government announced that it would hand Palestine over to the United Nations. On 29 November 1947, the UN adopted resolution 181, recommending the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, with special international status for the city of Jerusalem. We must remember that that was a UN statement, because we now have Trump and what I would describe as a toothless UN. Given the state of the West Bank, Gaza and the city of Jerusalem now, it is time to act. The 1947 proposals were unacceptable because they went against the principle of the right to self-determination and imposed unworkable conditions on the Palestinian people. Today, those conditions are still unworkable.

We need to know our past before we can go forward. Let us be clear: regardless of history, there is a way forward. The only way to achieve a lasting peace is to recognise a Palestinian state alongside an Israeli one. That was not possible in 1947, but, for me and many others, it is the only viable option open to us now. It is the only viable option for the Palestinian people, particularly those who are imprisoned in Gaza—the largest open-air prison in the world. That is not justice and it is not right.

We, in the Parliament and in Scotland, cannot continue to bury our heads in the sand. It is time for us and the rest of the UK to join other UN member states in recognising a state of Palestine. It is time that the UK Government recognised the state of Palestine. If we, in this Parliament, recognise the state of Palestine, it will send a huge message not just to the UN but throughout the world.

From the time that Britain administered Palestine until it abandoned it, in 1948, our involvement in Palestine has been quite shameful. As I said, I think that the UN is a toothless tiger, but we support any UN efforts to bring about a two-state solution. We have talked about it enough: it is time for action. I fully support the motion and my colleagues who have supported it, and I support the six measures that are mentioned in the motion.

▪ [Pauline McNeill \(Glasgow\) \(Lab\):](#)

The question of Palestine is the story of a people without a land—in fact, a people who were kicked out of their land in a very violent struggle. It is a simple story of colonial dispossession and ethnic cleansing.

Some people, such as Bill Bowman, do not want to recognise the recorded facts about the history of Palestine because they need and want to create a narrative to defend the Israel that they see. Clearly, Bill Bowman did not see any of the brutal elements of the occupation, which has now been going on for 53 years—the longest military occupation in history.

The world treats the issue as a multifaceted, complex story and demonises the struggle, as Bill Bowman has just done. People think that only Israel could possibly understand its complex story. Israel got 78 per cent of the former Palestine; the Palestinians were given 22 per cent, which has been occupied since 1967. The conflict is not about religion; it is about the Palestinian people's struggle for national identity. All they want to do is to achieve a sovereign independent state of their own, and it is our responsibility to champion that cause.

We are no further forward now than we were decades ago. There is no hope for Palestinians or for their future. Twenty years of peace talks have turned out to be a sham. It is interesting that Mr Bowman blames the Palestinian leadership. I met members of the Knesset

when I was an observer in the election. Some of the members were good enough to admit that they deliberately humiliated Yasser Arafat, who had laid down arms in order to provide a peaceful solution for the Palestinians. The people—rightly or wrongly—voted for Hamas in 2006. It does not matter what the Palestinian leadership does; there is always a reason not to grant Palestinians their state.

The state that we talk about is a state of occupation. Day and daily, children are shot in the street for throwing stones. Interestingly, the Jewish leader Henry Siegman, who is the former head of the American Jewish Congress, said that Israel is preventing a Palestinian state from being created. He said:

“Millions of Palestinians live in a subservient position without rights and without security, without hope, and without a future.” He said that Palestinians want only the same as what Israeli Jews want, as we would expect.

I am proud that Labour has said that, if it got into power, it would recognise Palestine as an independent sovereign state. I understand that that is also Scottish National Party policy. In fact, 138 countries have recognised Palestine as an independent sovereign state.

I want to talk about the action that has been taken against children during the occupation, including arrest and detention. Sandra White might remember that, when we were in Salwan many years ago, we met a three-year-old child who had been detained by the Israel Defense Forces for throwing stones. Children are interrogated and taken from their parents during the night. The parents are then presented with documentation in Hebrew that they cannot understand. Adolescents are locked in Israeli jails, but we do not know where they are and their families have not heard from them for 10 or 15 years. Is that the Israel that people want to defend? It is quite shocking that people do not at least recognise the brutality of the occupation. Forty per cent of minors are arrested in the public sphere simply for throwing stones. Most notably, when she was 17, Ahed Tamimi was arrested for slapping a soldier and sentenced to 18 months in jail. We should remember that the soldier had killed her cousin in front of her very eyes.

Ambassador Husam Zomlot has sent a letter to all MSPs. He says that this is a crucial moment in the history of the Palestine-Israel conflict, not just for Palestinians but for Israelis, too. The incumbent Israeli Prime Minister is facing an election in which he is openly advocating against the two-state solution. The two-state solution is British foreign policy, Conservative policy, Labour policy and Liberal policy, and it was US policy until very recently.

As Claudia Beamish said, the UK has a unique and historic responsibility. The Balfour declaration was clear that, in the creation of the state of Israel, the rights of the indigenous population were to be protected. No such protection has happened in the past five decades. The only way to secure peace in the region is to recognise that Israel must be challenged to draw back from its illegal occupation, get round the table and create an independent Palestinian state. If we believe in any kind of fairness, that is what we will support.

- [John Finnie \(Highlands and Islands\) \(Green\):](#)

I congratulate my friend and colleague Claudia Beamish on making an excellent speech, as ever. One phrase that I noted from it was “a just way forward”. I really hope that we are all up for that. In his letter to all of us, Ambassador Zomlot talked about Palestinians living “in peace, equality, freedom and with the ability to enjoy their basic right of self determination along with all other peoples in this world.” That is not radical; it is mainstream thinking.

There is nothing off the wall about that. It is the fundamental basis of liberal democracies, international law and basic humanitarian norms.

I understand why Mr Bowman did not want to accept interventions, but this is a debate—it is about discussing. I do not know the source of some of your information. We have spoken in countless debates and, if there is frustration in people's voices, it is because we are frustrated. I am weary of saying the same things. I will condemn violence from any quarter. Are you prepared to condemn violence from any quarter, Mr Bowman? No, you are not. You are not nodding your head.

That is the problem. This is not a contest of equals, if that is how it is viewed. There is a heavily armed apartheid regime. In every term of international law—I see Mr Mountain screwing his face up. That is exactly the same terminology that we applied to the oppressive regime in South Africa. Thank goodness we have progressed from there.

We progress only by having discussions. The peace that has come to the island of Ireland, which is presently under threat as a result of Mr Bowman's Government.

The paramedics who are targeted and shot in protests do not shoot at anyone, and the photographic journalists who cover demonstrations—that is what they are, and people have a right to free assembly and to express opinions—pose a threat to no one.

I had a speech prepared, but I am running out of time. I wanted to say that the motion is well crafted. It lays out a number of things in a very balanced way. Britain has a historical responsibility, and it is very well placed to bring about engagement. That is not about selling arms, turning a blind eye to the latest atrocity or having no comment to make. It is very important that we promote the “universal values that Britain helped enshrine”. Britain helped to enshrine those values at the conclusion of the second world war so that there would be no repetition of enclosed enclaves with people under attack, as there is in the biggest prison in the world, which will, according to the UN, be uninhabitable in a year. Collective punishment is illegal, but that is what is happening.

We all need to engage, and it is important that we engage in the chamber, too, although members may feel that we have little influence. I know that the Scottish Government engages, and I commend its efforts and willingness to engage in the matter and raise it internationally, which is very important.

Claudia Beamish and I saw children in Gaza. There is a traumatised community there. Day in, day out, adverse childhood experiences are talked about in the chamber. We talk about individuals in individual circumstances. An entire community there has had adverse experiences.

We must address the issue, and we will do so by talking. I hope that, when we speak about the issue next time, Mr Bowman will accept interventions, because we will progress matters by debate, not by ignoring each other.

[Alex Cole-Hamilton \(Edinburgh Western\) \(LD\):](#)

I, too, am grateful to Claudia Beamish for bringing such a well-crafted motion to Parliament this afternoon. It threads the needle to allow all sides of the chamber to support it, and the Liberal Democrats certainly do.

One of the darkest legacies of the British empire is the reality that, on maps around the world, lines that were drawn by British cartographers spark conflicts to this day. That carries with it a burden of atonement and redress that is handed down through the generations, and we as parliamentarians have a role to play in at least trying to unpick some of that mess. Nowhere is that cat's cradle greater than in the current state of affairs in Israel/Palestine. Three treaties, each born of motives of profit, conquest and military alliance in war time, have created that mess. Each of them has, in some way, created the state of affairs, and the state of conflict, that has existed in that region for the better part of a century.

The McMahon–Hussein agreement during world war one was brokered in part by T E Lawrence to bring Arabia into the war against the Ottoman empire, with the hint that it might have its own unified state of Arabia. The Sykes–Picot agreement took place at the end of the war, and saw the victors of that war carving up, for monetary gain, aspects of the middle east, drawing maps around oil wells and crashing peoples together to create states such as Iraq and Syria. Finally, as we have heard, the Balfour declaration of Lord Rothschild was designed first and foremost to help bring America into world war two with the promise of a Jewish homeland state.

Each of those treaties, seemingly vital to British interests at the time, effectively carved up the same piece of land and its peoples with no thought of the impact that it would have on those peoples or those lands for generation upon generation. That legacy is measured out in human lives—in the disproportionate violence and displacement that takes place to this very day. Between March and November last year, Israelis launched intermittent air and artillery attacks on the Gaza strip, killing 37 Palestinians, while Palestinian groups fired more than 1,000 rockets into Israel during the same period.

I welcome today's motion and the questions that it asks about what we in Scotland can and must do. As Lib Dems, we strongly believe that those two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, are obliged to share the region forever. However, it is part and parcel of our historic responsibility to help them do that. We favour neither group over the other in that reality, and we look forward to recognising a wholly autonomous and sovereign Palestinian state, when that will lead to a workable and sustainable two-state solution. We condemn the disproportionate use of force on both sides, whether that is rocket attacks by Palestinians or the Israelis' continuing illegal policy of settlement expansion. The morass of Israel/Palestine, and all the suffering that goes with it, is the dark inheritance of our history, and we need to play a part in its future.

[The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs \(Fiona Hyslop\):](#)

I welcome the debate, which calls for action towards an independent Palestine, for freedom of belief for all people, for respect for human rights, for respect for the rule of law, for accountability and for recognition of the state of Palestine alongside Israel. I thank Claudia Beamish for lodging the motion and for putting the issue in its historic context. In my remarks, I will address in order the six issues that are mentioned in the motion.

On the closure of Gaza, the Scottish Government encourages the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to prioritise a sustainable solution for Gaza that includes practical steps to ensure the reconstruction and economic recovery of Gaza. The current situation, in which Palestinians are trapped in Gaza and in a cycle of violence, should not be allowed to continue. UN figures state that, in 2018, 260 Palestinians were killed in Gaza, with a further 65 having been killed so far this year.

The border of Gaza needs to be reopened. According to an Oxfam report last year, unemployment rates in Gaza were, at 42 per cent, among the highest in the world. Some 96 per cent of water there is undrinkable, and access to electricity and medicine is severely restricted. A tolerant world should not allow a situation like that to develop. The end of the blockade of Gaza needs to go hand in hand with cessation of violence. That includes violence by Hamas in Gaza, which needs to commit to an end to attacks. United Nations figures show that 14 Israelis were killed by Palestinians last year, with a further eight deaths this year. Violence on both sides must end.

On freedom of worship, the right to worship fully is a key human right, and peace in the middle east is dependent on communities being free to pursue their religious beliefs. Without religious tolerance, there can be no long-term peace. I include in that the practice of Christianity in Israel, which is a key issue that my constituents have raised with me. Peace in the region is possible only if everyone is treated equally, no matter their beliefs, their ethnicity or their gender.

Our aspiration is for Scotland to act as a good global citizen, drawing on our own experience at home to promote tolerance and respect for human rights in other countries. People of all faiths, and none, must be supported to follow their way of life without fear of discrimination.

On respect for the rule of law, I say that with rights come responsibilities. Peace and a tolerant society will exist only where the human rights of all are respected and there is respect for the rule of law. That must be at the heart of any solution, thereby ensuring that a just and lasting peace can be maintained.

On accountability, the rule of law can be respected only where there is accountability. Security forces and the police, the Government and its institutions must be held to account. With no accountability, there can be no real trust. Without trust, there can no real peace.

On recognition of the state of Palestine, the Scottish Government, in line with other Governments in Europe, supports a two-state solution, based on the 1967 borders. More than 130 countries around the world have already formally recognised the state of Palestine. On 15 May 2018, I wrote to the UK Government to encourage it to do so at the UN, but as we know, it has not yet done so. Officially recognising the state of Palestine would send a clear signal that the right of the people of Palestine to self-determination is recognised.

We firmly encourage Israel and Palestine to reach, under international law, a sustainable and—yes—negotiated settlement, which has as its foundation mutual recognition and the determination to co-exist peacefully. Despite considerable diplomatic efforts in the past, the two-state solution has practical barriers. The construction of illegal settlements continues to be tolerated and even encouraged by the Government of Israel. Continuing plans for new settlements in the West Bank and the retroactive approval of unauthorised settlements undermines stability and the viability of a two-state solution.

Official recognition would make clear the expectations on a responsible independent Palestinian nation state. Palestine should aspire to recognised standards in terms of respect for human rights, the integrity of its neighbours and the sanctity of the lives of their people. The people of Palestine should not allow their territories to be used by those who seek the destruction of Israel. The people of Israel deserve to live free from the scourges of terrorism and antisemitic incitement that gravely undermine the prospects for a two-state solution.

We believe that peace depends on there being two secure, stable and prosperous states—Israel and Palestine—living side by side. Accepting Palestine as a state in its own right alongside Israel should be the starting point of negotiations. Within Scotland, the Scottish

Government does not tolerate violence or extremism in any form. Just as we condemn it when it is directed at any of our own communities, we condemn it in Israel and Palestine.

We believe that a lasting resolution that ends the settlement expansion and delivers peace for Israel and Palestine is long overdue. The UK needs to use its influence and to work with the international community and global institutions to secure a lasting peace in the region. That can be achieved only by taking a human rights-based approach, respecting the rights of all who live in the region and pushing for a two-state solution in which rights are respected.

We have consistently condemned obstacles to progress in the peace process, such as the indiscriminate rocket attacks on Israel and the continued expansion of illegal settlements in the occupied territories. We have repeatedly called on the UK Government to use its influence to help to revitalise the peace process, to find a way to break through the political deadlock and to bring an end to the conflict.

I commend the work of the Balfour Project to educate us all about the underlying causes of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The Scottish Government strongly encourages the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to work with the international community on securing long-term peace and ending the cycle of conflict that continues to affect Palestinians and Israelis. The Scottish Government supports the EU position of a two-state solution, based on the 1967 borders, and firmly encourages both Palestine and Israel to reach under international law a sustainable negotiated settlement that has, as its foundation, mutual recognition and the determination to co-exist peacefully.

We will continue to press the UK Government to do all that it can to work with international partners actively to secure peace in Israel and Palestine. A tolerant world can demand no less.

In this Parliament and in Scotland I want a tolerant debate, with understanding. We owe that to the people for whom we seek something similar, in terms of resolution. Perhaps we should start with ourselves, in this chamber.

Meeting closed at 17:46.