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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PRIVATE MEMBERS BUSINESS

Middle East: Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

SPEECH

Monday, 4 December 2000

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Pyne, Chris, MP

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Mr PYNE (Sturt) (3.22 pm)—I move:

That this House:

(1) expresses its dismay at the ongoing violence and incitement to violence in the Middle East and calls on both sides to immediately stop all violent acts and for the restoration of calm to the region;

(2) takes note of the far-reaching and courageous proposals made by Israel's Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, at Camp David and its disappointment that this historic opportunity was not successfully seized by all parties to the peace process;

(3) calls on all partners to resume negotiations without the threat of violence and without the premature announcement of unilateral declarations;

(4) expresses its grief for the innocent lives lost on both sides and condemns the unacceptable inclusion of children in violent activities on the front line and expresses the hope that violence will be stopped in accordance with the Sharm el-Sheik agreement;

(5) hopes that the conflict will be resolved in the framework of agreement and compromise;

(6) calls on the leadership of the Israeli and Palestinian people to restore trust and confidence in order to pave the way for the resumption of peace negotiations;

(7) calls on all countries surrounding the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian territories to ensure their sovereign territory not be used to promote aggression into an already turbulent area; and

(8) believes that peaceful coexistence is the only option for both Israelis and Palestinians now and into the future.

The ongoing conflict and incitement of violence and retaliation we are witnessing in Gaza and the West Bank and Israel is a devastating setback in the long road to peace in the Middle East. It is devastating on two levels. The first is the senseless violence and loss of life which has resulted from the vicious circle of incitement and retaliation and the failure of the Palestinian leadership to take all steps to pacify their supporters. The second is the enormous damage done to prospects of achieving a lasting peace. I sincerely hope that every member of this House can agree that the first priority is for the violence and bloodshed to stop and for negotiations to resume. It is the only way to salvage any prospect of a lasting peace in the Middle East.

Present developments in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza over recent weeks resemble a tragic paradox. At the Camp David summit, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered the most generous, far reaching and indeed unprecedented concessions to Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian National Authority. The proposal has, however, elicited the most violent and militant reaction from Palestinians since the beginning of the peace process. It is fundamentally disappointing that such a historic and progressive opportunity was not successfully seized upon by all parties involved. Since that time, the 'peace partnership' that has been evident in recent years has broken down to the extent that the incitement and retaliation of teenage stone-throwers and armed militia now represent the progress of the Middle East peace process. The result has been the loss of innocent lives on the front line, the death of children and the ever diverging possibility of future agreement. Such tragic consequences following the rejection of the Barak offer are all the more distressing considering that the generous terms set out in the proposal came exceedingly close to meeting stated Palestinian demands. Indeed, on the strength of this a resolution seemed imminent.

The significance of Ehud Barak's steps should not be underestimated. The position presently taken by Israel has proved to be the most accommodating to date, to the extent that no such concessions would have seemed conceivable to previous Israeli prime ministers. The proposal included offering the establishment of a Palestinian state in all of Gaza and almost all of the West Bank, Palestinian sovereignty in the great majority of Arab areas in East Jerusalem and an arrangement of joint control over the remaining land. A further offer included vacant

land within Israel's 1948 borders as compensation for the continued Israeli control of heavily Jewish portions of the West Bank.

That the proposal has resulted in both violence and the breakdown of agreement and compromise helps no-one. Despite declining the Israeli proposal, it seems the Palestinian leadership provided no substitute proposal nor even an indication of what would presently be acceptable to the Palestinians. Quite apart from the tragically needless waste of life and resources on both sides, the recent combined efforts of both parties have cast a grave shadow over the peace process, damaging the prospects of a lasting peace. It is essential that the leadership of the Israeli and Palestinian people take swift action to restore trust and confidence in the peace process. Once re-established, such trust will pave the way for the resumption of peace negotiations in a framework of agreement and compromise. Encouragingly, and despite provocation, Israel has been forthcoming in offering a series of confidence building measures if the campaign of sniping, bombing and violence is called off. These measures include the reopening of crossings, a pulling back of forces and the reopening of the Gaza airport. It is by the extension of such goodwill that a framework for peaceful coexistence can develop. It is clear that such coexistence is the only acceptable outcome of any Palestinian-Israeli agreement, now and in the future.

Importantly, Israel's likely election in the coming months does not change the fundamental need for an end to violence. Indeed, it highlights the urgency for renewed negotiations and a development of confidence in the Israeli state. It is apparent that the Israeli electoral culture and Ehud Barak's internal political difficulties have not inhibited his enthusiasm and commitment in pursuing the peace process. It is also clear from prominent Jewish sources inside and outside Israel that he would most likely have received the backing of both parliament and the electorate had Yasser Arafat agreed to the Israeli concessions at Camp David last July. Both Palestinians and Israelis, in their quest for rights and sovereignty, have a fundamental interest in making peace and immediately avoiding intense and widespread conflict. This is particularly so considering that in this particular period, unlike any other in the modern history of the Middle East, the influence of external world powers upon the outcome is at its lowest. For the first time since Napoleon Bonaparte's conquest of Palestine, Palestinians and Israelis have the opportunity to settle their own affairs and build upon the confidence and security which such an outcome would bring. The only way to overcome the devastating setback to the peace process, to put an end to incitement, violence, the senseless loss of life and the killing of children is for both aggressors to re-enter the Middle East peace process. This must be done with a spirit of cooperation and conciliation, in recognition that peaceful coexistence is the only option available for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Can I also thank members of both sides of the House for the bipartisan way in which they have approached the serious questions facing the Middle East peace process in the last few months. On a number of occasions the Jewish community here in Australia have brought speakers, academics and others to Parliament House to meet with members of both the coalition and the opposition, and the Australia-Israel Parliamentary Friendship Group, chaired by me and with the member for Melbourne Ports as secretary, have worked tirelessly to try to include as many coalition and opposition members as possible in our meetings to spread the opportunity for information to each of the members of the parliament.

One of the most obvious aspects of the current situation is that the media have not reported the goings-on in the Middle East in such a way as to provide us with the facts surrounding much of the situation facing the Middle East. There are countless examples. I think of one particularly: the photograph published in, I think, the Melbourne *Herald Sun* of a so-called Palestinian boy, bloodied and beaten, being stood over by an Israeli soldier. As it turned out, in fact the photograph was of a Jewish boy in Jerusalem who had been beaten up by a mob of angry Palestinians, and the Israeli soldier had come to the boy's rescue. But it highlights the role the media plays in the information that is sent out to the public. In that case the photograph, I think, was on page 1 or page 3 of the *Herald Sun*, but the retraction was, as usual, a small piece somewhere back in the newspaper.

I also draw attention to the *Australian's* coverage of the Middle East process. The way they have reported it on occasions almost suggests that actions taken by the Israeli state were designed to inflame passions amongst Palestinians. I think it has been obvious from the efforts being made by Ehud Barak and his government that the last thing they would want to do is inflame passions amongst the Palestinian leadership, and that is why they made the concessions that they did at the Camp David summit which resulted in a failure on the part of both to agree, and they then attended the Sharm el-Sheik discussions to try to bring an end to the violence. One thing is for certain: I think all members of the House wish to see a speedy conclusion to the problems facing the Middle East and the settling down and the stability that will lead to a peaceful, happy coexistence between both Israelis and Palestinians in that part of the world.