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The Bush visit to the Middle East, like the Annapolis Conference, naturally focussed attention on the vexed questions of the peace process, the creation of a viable Palestinian state, and the settlements. But there is a complementary issue, frequently overlooked by the international community, namely the situation of the Israeli Arabs, or as they prefer to be known, the Palestinian Citizens of Israel, twenty per cent of the population.

I have recently returned from a visit to Israel as part of a delegation of US, Canadian and UK philanthropic organisations, mostly Jewish, which explored the issues on the ground, meeting people from both communities.

It was a salutary experience; many, though not all of us, were familiar with the facts, but to see them on the ground was to see them in sharp perspective.

This year Israel celebrates its 60th anniversary, and it has much of which it can be proud. But as successive Israeli Prime Ministers and Governments have acknowledged, there is an unacceptable gap between the State's Jewish and Palestinian citizens, notwithstanding the pledge in Israel's Declaration of Independence to afford equal treatment to all its citizens.

We saw and heard at first hand, from both Jewish and Palestinian Israelis how far there is to go to fulfil that fundamental pledge. It should be recognised, however, that Israel's Palestinian Citizens have the vote, there are elected mayors and councils and Palestinian members of the Knesset, and at long last a Palestinian Minister. There is moreover recourse to law and an independent judiciary, and in terms of both civil rights and material well-being Israel's Palestinians compare favourably with the citizens of most of the region. Yet that is not the appropriate benchmark; what matters is how their condition compares to the Jewish majority (though there are many within that majority who are also disadvantaged).

The disparity is most starkly evident in the fields of education, housing and planning. Spending on Jewish children per capita is four fold that on their Israeli Palestinian counterparts, and whilst Haifa and Tel Aviv Universities reflect the overall population balance that is not typical. In both housing and planning there is a painful contrast between the provision in Arab towns like Um al Fahm, Nazareth and the Negev, especially the unrecognised Bedouin villages in the latter, and the much more generous provision in Jewish areas, with severe restrictions on what can be built and where. Mixed towns like Ramle and Jaffa have seen little or no new building for their Palestinian citizens since 1948, despite population growth. Similarly permission to develop industrial zones, critical to the income of local councils (Jewish towns raise 70% of their local tax from industry and commerce, Israeli Palestinian towns only 20%) is heavily weighted in favour of Jewish towns. We saw Nazareth and Sakhnin with much larger populations but much less land than the adjoining predominantly Jewish areas of Upper Nazareth or Mizgav. The problem is compounded by a planning system in which Israeli Palestinians are markedly under-represented, with just two out of seventeen members on the body responsible for Galilee, where the population split is 50-50.

Yet, particularly in the fields of education and economic development these gross inequalities send a dual message. They offend the moral sense, and are quite contrary to Jewish values, but

also the pragmatic requirements of the day. Under largely right wing governments for the last few years education spending in Israel has been cut and attainment levels have been falling, while from being the most equal it is now the most unequal of developed economies. Israel needs to develop and harness the educational and economic potential of all its citizens, not to mention the purchasing power of its poorer citizens, if it is to thrive and prosper.

The Or Commission, established to report on the second intifada of 2000, while critical of the Israeli Arab leadership, condemned the inequitable distribution of resources, but four years after its report little tangible progress has been made. Of course local councils the world over complain of insufficient government funding, and a number of Jewish councils suffer too, but all the Israeli Palestinians are amongst the most deprived.

The philanthropic world, especially in the Jewish Diaspora, can contribute to realising the goal of equality between the sectors by direct project financing (the UK's UJIA has broken new ground by a significant, if as yet modest, investment in the major strategic plans for the Galilee for the particular benefit of the non-Jewish population) but also by pressing the Government of Israel to live up to its declared objectives. The international community should do likewise. The local government family, led by the Local Government Association, can also help by capacity building in the Israeli Palestinian municipal sector, with whom talks have already taken place, and by encouraging a coalition of the disadvantaged, Jewish and Arab, to press for needs-based Government financial support, and the full engagement of Israeli Palestinians in economic development and the major investment planned for the Galilee and Negev regions.

The delegation found much to trouble it, but also much to inspire it, ranging from joint working by young Bedouin and Jewish women in education in the Negev to an art gallery in Um al Fahm exhibiting works by Jewish and Palestinian artists, with ambitious plans for expansion run by a Palestinian campaigning for equality and cooperation between both communities. We were impressed by a courageous Bedouin woman's campaigning for improved services and women's rights, and by the frank speech of a Labor Minister, Isaac Hertzog, pledging action for vulnerable children, especially in the Palestinian sector. Most of us came away strengthened in our resolve to try to ensure that the drive for equality ceases to be a forgotten issue, but rather assumes the high priority in Israel's political, social and economic agenda recommended by the Or Commission. That way lies the most promising future for a state with a Jewish majority respecting the rights of its non-Jewish minority, and that minority respecting the aspirations of the majority for a homeland for the Jewish people.

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