

Deputy Leader Tom Watson MP's speech to LFI Annual Lunch 2016

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Tom Watson MP, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party's speech to the LFI Annual Lunch 2016.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Friends, you honour me with the invitation to address you today.

I want to join with Joan in thanking Sir David Garrard and Isaac Kaye for making this wonderful gathering possible.

And David, it is your determination and vision that means LFI continues to thrive as a leading voice in Parliament, unafraid to discuss the difficult issues, but also fearless in its support for the state of Israel.

I pay tribute to Joan's leadership of LFI over the past year, along with Baroness Meta Ramsay, our Chair of the LFI group in the House of Lords, and LFI's fantastic director, Jennifer Gerber.

I am pleased to see so many friends from parliament here – a testament to the great work of LFI – and from outside parliament too: in particular Adrian Cohen, the lay chair of LFI.

I can see my friend and mentor Trevor Chinn here, and I'd like to thank him for all the advice and guidance that he's given to me personally.

And though Michael Levy cannot be here I'd like to thank him for his support for the Labour party over many years. It's his wife Gilda's seventieth birthday today, so I am sure we all wish her a hearty mazel tov!

And it's a special pleasure to be here with both Chief Rabbi Mirvis and with Ambassador Mark Regev.

Friends, my interest in Jewish culture didn't begin when I became an MP but at a very early age when I befriended Peter and Anthony Seager, the only two Jewish kids in my home town of Kidderminster.

But it wasn't until my friend Nick Cosgrove, who ran Hull University's small but valiant Jewish society, invited me to the Shabbat meal at his student house that I began to understand just what a remarkable story British Jews have to tell.

Nick taught me about Jewish culture and values over food, which in my book, is the

best way for culture and politics to be discussed.

Memories of that Shabbat meal have stayed with me.

Whilst preparing for today, I managed to persuade Sir David to give me some tips on the content and style of the speech. Dispensing advice over a sumptuous breakfast, he told me that at formal events like this, he likes to put his audience at ease by sharing a joke.

I assure you that I am not going to share the gag he told me, but to put you at ease, I will share a song that I learnt a quarter of a century ago, at a Shabbat meal with the members of Hull University Jewish Society. If I sing it incorrectly blame my friend Nick.

Am Yisrael Chai

Am Yisrael Chai

Am Yisrael, Am Yisrael, Am Yisrael Chai

As many of you know, Sunday was Mitzvah Day, when thousands of people gave their time to local community projects. The founder of Mitzvah Day, Laura Marks, is here with us today.

But, as I understand it, the very word “mitzvah” has a dual meaning – both a good deed and a commandment, a duty. Doing good deeds isn’t just something that makes us feel good about ourselves; it’s required of us, commanded of us.

For me, supporting LFI is like that. The things LFI does – promoting a two-state solution, opposing the BDS movement and supporting those fighting for peace and coexistence – are good things to do, but they are a moral responsibility too for all of us, a commandment.

We support LFI, and we support Israel, because our consciences dictate it. I am proud to be an LFI Parliamentary Supporter and proud to be a Vice President of Trade Union Friends of Israel.

And on that, let me say something before we get any further today about taking on anti-Semitism in the Labour Party: that’s a moral responsibility. I am ashamed that I am saying anti-Semitism and Labour in the same sentence.

But dealing with it can’t be something we do for show, for the sake of it, because we’ve come under media pressure, or because we need to deal with a political problem. It’s a commandment.

I know that people here are understandably frustrated by how long it's taking the Labour Party to deal with anti-Semitism in our midst. You're right to be. It should have been quicker.

I know there are still some outstanding issues that cannot be ignored. They won't be ignored. Action is being taken now and if, God forbid, we find these problems again, action will be quicker in the future.

Labour's bonds with the Jewish community and with Israel are historic and long-standing. Those bonds preceded the creation of the state of Israel. As we mark the centenary of the Balfour Declaration over the coming year, we should celebrate the part our party played in ensuring the Jewish people their right to self-determination, right back to 1917 when a special conference of the Labour Party and trade unions approved the War Aims Memorandum, which endorsed a Jewish national home in Palestine.

Today is the anniversary of the UN's vote in 1947 to create a Jewish state. And it was on the Labour benches where the new state of Israel's greatest friends were to be found: Ian Mikardo, Harold Wilson, Richard Crossman, Barbara Castle, Ted Short.

And in Israel's hours of greatest need in June 1967 and October 1973 Wilson's stalwart defence of Israel exemplified the historic bonds between Labour and the Jewish state.

Nor is any of this ancient history: the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown supported Israel's right to defend itself, vigorously opposed the boycott movement, and backed the efforts of our friends in the Israeli Labor party to work for a two-state solution.

And that will be the policy of the next Labour government, too.

Labour's bonds with Israel are not going away, because they reflect a moral responsibility and a commandment. A mitzvah.

Two weeks ago, I returned from an LFI delegation to Israel. My second time there.

I had the pleasure while there to meet with the Chairman of the Israeli Labor party, Isaac Herzog, and some of the MKs from our sister party.

Bougie's determination to continue to push the path of peace, even in the face of – I think he would say, especially, in the face of – the terror attacks of the past year, represents great courage and great leadership. We send him and his parliamentary colleagues our support and our thanks.

I began my visit to Israel by laying a wreath at Yad Vashem. Visiting the Children's Memorial. Seeing the Hall of Names.

And walking through the Avenue of the Righteous, as you may have done, I was reminded of the words of Professor Yehuda Bauer:

"Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander."

There was a very poignant photograph at Yad Vashem that was so vivid it is now committed to memory. It was a scene from a Ukrainian death camp. A beautiful, fresh faced young mother, shielding tight her sleeping child before extermination.

Our guide, Asher, whispered the phrase "to save a life is as if you've saved the world".

And the wreath laying was a moment when my colleagues, Dame Rosie Winterton, Michael Dugher, Gloria DePiero and Ruth Smeeth could reflect on one of Europe's darkest periods of history, from the victims, to the survivors and to our own kindertransport.

But when I laid the wreath my thoughts were also more parochial. My children. They're my world, the centre of the universe. And when they're supporting Aston Villa in their scarves and hats, they sit with Alfie and Jack Austin, the children of Ian Austin, whose own father escaped the Holocaust because of the bravery of others, and was able to raise Ian.

To save a life is as if you've saved the world. To save a life is as if you've saved the world

And that's why also, I'm proud of the work I did with Ian in my early years as an MP to support the work of Karen Pollock and the Holocaust Educational Trust.

Enabling thousands of young people from all backgrounds to learn about the Holocaust, see the Auschwitz concentration and death camp for themselves.

The Trust's work ensures that we will never be bystanders again.

So let me say today, clearly: I will not be a bystander when the perpetrators of hate suggest that the founding fathers of the Jewish state collaborated with those who murdered six million Jews.

Let's have no more parallels drawn between today's tragic conflict in Israel-Palestine and the bloodlands of central and Eastern Europe.

And let us never allow the myth to take root that the Holocaust wasn't a uniquely evil event that we should solemnly mark and ensure our children never forget.

Those survivors of that tragedy and their descendants painstakingly built the world's first Jewish state. And in just over half a century what have they achieved?

A vibrant democracy;

A state which strives for equality between men and women, Jew and Arab, gay and straight;

A country with a fearless media; trade unions which battle unceasingly for a better deal for working people; and an independent judiciary which seeks to protect the powerless from the powerful.

Israel may sometimes fall short – which western country does not? – but its aspirations are ones that too few of its neighbours share.

Israel may not be imperilled as it was in its early years, but it remains a nation under attack.

We cannot watch the glee with which some people have been celebrating the recent fires in Israel, some of them tweeting with the hashtag #IsraellsBurning, without understanding that Israel faces a level of hostility few other countries experience.

And those in this country who campaign for boycotts, divestment and sanctions seek to demonise and delegitimise the world's only Jewish state.

Let me be clear.

The BDS movement is morally wrong.

It is failing.

And it does nothing to advance the cause of peace or advance a two-state solution.

Because fundamentally, that's what we all want to see: a two-state solution, as advanced by one of our movement's heroes.

This year we lost Shimon Peres, a man who exemplified, witnessed and created so much of the history of the modern state of Israel, and who never gave up on peace.

Peres was a wise man. He understood the peace through security paradigm, but he never gave up dialogue, trying to understand the views of those that opposed you.

My first visit to Israel, nearly 25 years ago as a student leader, was at the apex of hope. The Oslo talks which Shimon Peres did so much to broker had just been made public.

I was struck a quarter of a century later how the country had remained resilient in the face of unprecedented terror attacks. I was saddened to have to go through a metal detector to pay respects at the Western wall.

Over the past year, the people of Israel have faced a wave of terror attacks.

167 stabbings, 116 shootings, 48 car ramming attacks in which 42 people have lost their lives and over 550 have been injured.

This is not, as President Abbas, has suggested, “a peaceful uprising”.

No matter how just the cause of the Palestinian people –

and, like LFI, the Labour party is unequivocal in its support for an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state –

there can be no defence, no excuse, no justification for such violence.

The security of Israel and the safety of its people are non-negotiable.

We in the Labour Party stand by the people of Israel at this difficult time.

We stand with those fighting for peace.

And we stand against all those – Hamas, Hezbollah and all those who encourage, commit and excuse terrorist acts – who seek to frustrate it.

Those who are not friends of peace are no friends of the Labour party.

And 25 years after my first visit, amid the violence which too often scars this beautiful land, and the lack of any progress on the peace process, it can sometimes feel that the region is at the nadir of hope.

But I saw hope on my visit. I saw it when I met young Palestinian and Israeli graduates of one of the many people-to-people projects that are helping to foster trust, cooperation and relationships across seemingly unbridgeable divides.

In the speech he gave accepting his so richly deserved Nobel Peace Prize, the late Yitzhak Rabin spoke of building peace “layer by layer, brick by brick, beam by beam”.

Surely Britain’s role, with our historic links in the region, must be to work to foster understanding, bring people together, to help lay the bricks and beams of a future peace.

That's why I am so pleased today to endorse the campaign LFI launched a few weeks ago – 'For Israel, For Palestine, For Peace' – in support of the establishment of an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.

I can think of few more fitting ways to mark the centenary of Balfour.

So thank you for being here today.

For your support for LFI.

And your support for Israel, for a two-state solution and for peace.

As Labour's Deputy Leader, I am wholeheartedly a part of your movement and your community. I'm proud to be a part of it. It's a moral responsibility.

Your cause, your principles and your hopes have been, and remain, those of the Labour party.



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"Labour Friends of Israel plays an incredibly important role in the debate about a peaceful settlement in the Middle East. "They do fantastic work strengthening bilateral relations between Britain and Israel, building links with our sister party in Israel and supporting Israelis and Palestinians working towards a negotiated two state solution."

January 2017

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