

Prof. Avishay Braverman - Minister for Minority Affairs

*28 October 2009*

### **Introduction by Marcus Sheff**

Can I start by noting that today is the day in Israel that we remember Yitzchak Rabin's death. I was present at the time he was killed in Tel Aviv and it is an important time to remember his legacy in order that it should be a light to us all.

Our speaker today, Professor Braverman has spent fourteen years at the world bank and sixteen years at Ben Gurion university. He has now entered politics to implement change.

### **Braverman**

I would also like to start by talking about Yitzchak Rabin, and the three elements to his legacy:

Firstly he had a great military legacy being a General and Chief of Staff of the Israeli army.

The second element to his legacy was the realisation that the solution was to move forward with the PLO to form a two state solution for two people. This remains the number one strategic issue today and it is important that even with the current weakness of Abbas we must move forward with the peace process today. President Obama must put pressure on Abbas to move the peace process forward.

Lastly, Yitzchak Rabin was the Prime Minister most engaged in improving the situation of the Israeli Arabs through improvement in education and infrastructure and the Israeli Arabs embraced him for these improvements.

Israeli Arabs today are fully engaged in the democratic process and have a better standard of living than the Arabs in neighbouring countries, however, they remain below other Israeli citizens and this is the discrepancy that should be corrected.

Not only is it in our constitution to treat all citizens equally and not only is it morally right to do so, but it is also the smart thing to do to help secure and benefit Israel generally.

I have been working to this aim throughout my career outside politics. When I started working at Ben Gurion University there were only 40 male and 4 female Bedouin students. Today there are now around 250 male and 250 female Bedouin students and 4 Bedouin professors.

This issue is not something that is a political “right wing” or “left wing” issue, it transcends political views and is considered important by all political views. I have been work closely with Binyamin Begin (son of the former legendary Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin) on these issues even though he has different political views. Unfortunately sometimes people do damage to Israel’s international reputation by making negative statements on these topics, but they are in the minority and these comments should be ignored.

Israel has recently been applying to be included into the OECD. Its inclusion is not an issue of GDP or the number of start-ups as Israel’s GDP is sufficient and it produces one of the highest number of start-ups outside of Silicon valley in the world. The issue as to whether Israel’s application will be successful is the level of equality of its citizens; the issue is primarily concerned with the Israeli Arabs and ultra orthodox population.

I have devoted my life to economic development and social justice. Binyamin Netanyahu has promised me that he will pass new policies to improve the situation for Israeli Arabs. I believe in actions not talks. I believe that to be a successful government on this point we will be judged on the actions we take on this issue.

How a government is viewed international is a critical test of government. We therefore need to move forward with the peace process. For the peace process to move forward we need America to put pressure on the Palestinians. I believe what the final agreement needs to be is clear. It will consist of a two state solution where 75% of the Israeli settlement population will be absorbed into Israel which constitutes roughly 4 -5% of

the West Bank. This land can be swapped for land within pre-1967 Israel which will become part of the Palestinian State. The remaining 25% of the Israeli Settlement population will be within the future Palestinian state and it will be their choice whether they chose to be evacuated with compensation back to Israel or whether they chose to remain with the Palestinian State. The right of return and Jerusalem are not the key issues. The key issue is exactly where the border will be between the two states. This will require hard decisions on both sides but once they have been decided the other issues will fall into place.

We are trying to improve the situation for all Israelis and Palestinians and only through making these hard decisions will we be able to do so. Today provides the opportunity for Binyamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas to make historic decisions and it is a test whether they are able to rise to these decisions.

I am now going to talk about the Goldstone report. The Report was biased, distorted and unacceptable. The Israeli army is the most moral army in the world - more moral than the Russian or American army. The government may have made mistakes during the Goldstone process by not participating in the investigation and hence receiving a less positive report than it is likely to have received if it would have participated.

I believe the solution, moving forward is for Israel to form a commission of investigation headed by an internationally respected [justice], for example Ahron Barak, and the commission should take each individual point from the Goldstone Report and answer them one by one.

Why do I have a different view to the Chairman of the party or Ehud Barak on this Point? Because I believe the report is so distorted, and Israel has become so isolated, if a well known judge answers each point one by one they will be able to clearly refute the Goldstone Report and help to minimise Israel's international isolation.

This approach is essentially about being wise. Of course Israel's army is better and more moral than any other army in the world, but due to the international climate and lack of understanding it is in our own self interest

to do this as it would lessen Israel's isolation and help protect army officers in the future.

I would like to discuss the key issues facing Israeli Arabs today:

### 1) Employment:

One of the key reasons why Israel's GDP is not higher is because of a low participation rate in the work force, which is much lower than any other country with a similar GDP. This is mainly because of a lack of Israeli Arab women and ultra orthodox men in the work force.

With regard to the ultra orthodox, the very top scholars should be allowed to learn but it was a terrible mistake to allow such a high percentage of the ultra orthodox population not to work. We need to get them into the work force.

Only 20% of Israeli Arab women are in the work force compared with 60% of Israeli women generally. There is a large potential for economic growth if Israel re-designed its work structure, this could potentially increase GDP by 3-4%. The major growth area has the potential to come primarily from the Arab sector. We need to facilitate the Arab sector in starting commercial centres. We also need to create local industry for Arab women, by doing these things we will help the economy and also help to minimise the inequality within Israel.

We have started a fund with 460million shekel (mostly government funded) to help projects for the Arab sector.

We also need to increase the integration between the Arab and Israeli sectors. Often it does not make sense to have one industrial park for Arabs and one for Jews, these projects should be combined.

The software industry is presenting another major issue to the Israeli economy. Some large software companies are thinking of moving centers from Israel to Bangalore (and other cheap centres round the world). I have spoken to leaders of the Israeli Arabs in the Galil and suggested we try and set up centers for these software companies within the Galil region where we will be able to provide the labour requirements of these companies.

## 2) Construction:

Arab villages and municipalities are at a disadvantage compared to Jewish neighbourhoods. I intend on cutting the bureaucracy and make it easier for Arab housing, planning and development.

## 3) Education:

Certain elements of the education system are culturally biased and therefore put Israeli Arabs at a disadvantage, for example the psychometric exams. We need to make it fairer to all citizens and to try and absorb more Arab students. I would like to see more Arab universities. I don't believe there should be Arab or Jewish Universities but for example Haifa university has 70% Jewish students and 30% Arab students. There should be universities where there are 70% Arab students and 30% Jewish students.

I am not a politician, I have come from 30 years of doing things. In Golda Meir's government there was a minister who was the wisest ministers who did not speak often. He once spoke in a meeting and Golda Meir said you speak wisely but not as wisely as your silence.

A test of government is doing things, so I hope to implement these plans and the media should check what we are actually doing, unless we have done things we have not fulfilled the destiny of the government.

## **Questions and Answers**

To move the peace process forward needs pressure on Mahmoud Abbas, but do we not also need pressure on Israel?

Braverman:

I will be frank, we need pressure on both sides for the benefit of the future of our grandchildren. Just like in banks you need pressure to get projects done, likewise in government.

So do you not think we should have freeze on settlements to help this?

Braverman:

The issue is what settlements stay within Israel and which goes to the Palestinians. Therefore this is not a major issue as if a settlement is to stay within Israel the small details do not matter. It does not go to the heart of the matter. We need to make the main agreement and not be concerned with the small issues. Once we agree on the big issues then we agree it is the end of the conflict.

Mr Chalil, the former assistant of Sadat, told me that when Sadat came to Jerusalem nearly all his ministers decided to leave him. It is the intention of the parties itself when they enter the negotiations that is the key issue, only then will they be able to reach an agreement.

What are Binyamin Netanyahu's intentions?

Braverman:

The test will be in the actions that Netanyahu decides to take.

What was the OECD's decision concerning whether to remove east Jerusalem and the West Bank from Israel's GDP calculations?

Braverman:

In the discussions we focussed on employment and what needed to be affected in the Arab population, we did not discuss diplomatic issues.

It is not clear what decision the OECD will come to but the decision will be a political one as Israel has achieved all the criteria to become part of the OECD.

I am surprised that you were dismissive of east Jerusalem being a central issue as the Arabs view it as the capital of their future state and the Prime Minister has stated it is the undividable capital of Israel?

Braverman:

The temple mount specifically is a key inflammation point. The Israeli state has always stated that Jews can not pray on temple mount and rabbis today say that individuals are not allowed to go on the temple mount. Rabbi Goren who was the Chief Rabbi of the army during the 1967 war and afterwards Chief Rabbi of Israel always stated that Jews were not allowed up onto the temple mount.

Only recently a few extreme rabbis have changed the rules of the rabbis set down over the last 2000 years and now say that Jews are allowed to pray on the temple mount. The government of Israel still says Jews are not allowed to pray there.

Extreme Jews and extreme Muslims can ignite massive passion on this topic. If Muslims claim that Jews are praying on the temple mount the world can inflame over this issue. Extreme elements know by inflaming this issue they can create negative energy which helps stop the peace process.

Ultimately, with Jerusalem hard decisions will have to be made as to exactly where the border will be. These decisions will be the same as the hard decisions around other border areas.

Why is Netanyahu so popular, is it because he is standing up against America? By backing Netanyahu are the Israel population saying they are against peace?

Braverman:

The key decisions should not be based on what people want. I do not think the polls are important, the key is what we have done and we will do over the next few years. If we do not take action now we will end up with one

state for two people and this will go against Israel's moral and Jewish character.

Harry Truman had a very low popularity rate, but he did what was right, for example with Marshall aid and was one of the greatest post Second World War presidents. The polls do not matter, it is what we do over the next 7 years to create a solution that will be key.

As the Jewish Settlers will be offered to stay within the Palestinian state - will Israeli Arabs have the same choice about citizenship of the Palestinian state?

Braverman:

All Israeli Arabs are citizens and they will stay as Israeli citizens. Israeli Arabs want to be citizens and they need to be absorbed.

Palestinians feel the pressure is only being placed on Abbas. The main concession on Israel, to freeze settlement expansion, has been denied by Netanyahu?

Braverman:

America is our key ally, any PM to negate this relationship is making a mistake. It is media and others that are trying to suggest there is a breach in the relationship. I support Obama. When America is still strong it is a mistake not to use them and god forbid any leader should weaken Obama or alienate America. As America wants to move on this issue we should join them on moving forward.