

Israel's Peres calls for national unity

by Gil Rivière-Wekstein

Former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres took the opportunity of a recent visit to Paris to explain, to an audience of over 700 people at the Espace Cardin on Dec. 8, 1996, his analysis of the situation in the Middle East. Also present, to express their uneasiness at the current direction of the peace process, were Lionel Jospin, Simone Veil, Alain Finkelkraut, and many other personalities.

And thus it was that, wielding his words like a weapon, Alain Finkelkraut, a star in the firmament of the contemporary French intelligentsia, pummeled the audience with a rousing and alarmist speech, full of trenchant formulations of the type at which such "philosophers" so excel. His analysis—coherent and apparently accurate in its own terms—enveloped the room in a somber cloud of suicidal despair. "Israel: The Catastrophe"—that headline summed up the tenor of his speech, reprinted in part in the pages of the daily *Le Monde* on Dec. 18.

Coming from an entirely different universe, in which contemplative impotence is not acceptable, Peres gave a lesson in statecraft and statesmanship, in the course of the meeting. After having reaffirmed the fundamental principles upon which peace depends, and having identified the international transformation which has been taking place since the collapse of the East bloc, the former prime minister blasted those who "imagine that the peace process is a sort of poetry." He reviewed the various steps of the peace process: first, initiating dialogue with a partner who was only yesterday an enemy; next, listening to that new partner's demands and claims, understanding his way of thinking, making concessions; then, finally, convincing one's own camp of the necessity of making those concessions. According to Peres, this long process, filled with obstacles and disappointments (as he could certainly testify to), is nonetheless irreversible.

Peres argued passionately in favor of installing a government of national unity, an idea which is unacceptable in the closed and frozen universe of Alain Finkelkraut. For, within that universe, Peres's choice can lead to nothing but disaster, and "runs a serious risk, when all is said and done, of lending credibility to the worst side." Thus, although no doubt greatly esteeming the former prime minister, the "philosopher" sows discord in his camp. Moreover, full of arrogance, after having received a response from the Nobel Peace Prize winner,

Finkelkraut reiterated his warning and—feeding the discord—arranged to have his speech published, 10 days later, in *Le Monde*. All that, without ever proposing an alternative.

Netanyahu's future prospects

Contrary to the image promoted by the media, and reflected in Finkelkraut's analysis, Israel's current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, finds himself in an extremely weak position. A recent sampling of public opinion published in the Israeli paper *Ma'ariv* confirmed that the current government has lost its credibility with a large majority of the population. We are witnessing today the gravest crisis of confidence between the prime minister and the military apparatus; the Army is divided and demobilized; the head of the Shin Beth, Ami Ayalon, is denouncing the dangers inherent in Netanyahu's policy; the parties which make up Netanyahu's governing coalition increasingly doubt his effectiveness. The ministries of Education, Defense, and Foreign Affairs openly criticize the prime minister's method of governing; even the head of state, President Ezer Weizman, regularly subjects Netanyahu to numerous warnings; the Israeli economy is slowing down, because foreign investors fear a new war with the Arab world, in particular with Syria. And even Ariel Sharon, leader of the extreme right wing, seems to prefer a government of national unity to a Netanyahu government incompetent on all fronts.

Economic development is the key

The real question is not whether a government of national unity is desirable, but what its content and economic policy will be.

Peres's speech indirectly answered that question. Reaffirming the principles underlying the economy, he outlined the fundamental role of scientific and technological progress. To illustrate his point, he chose to examine the difference between the economy of the former U.S.S.R. and that of Israel. From the point when relations between the two countries were normalized, he explained, the former Soviet Union, despite having much greater area, population, and natural resources, began importing foodstuffs from Israel.

"From this," said Peres ironically, "I deduced that Zionist cows are superior to Communist cows."

In the tradition of David Ben Gurion, the Labor Party leader demonstrated that the future of Israel lies not in territorial aggrandizement, but in an economy based on science and morality, the only real guarantees of Israel's security. Freed from prejudice, Israelis, Palestinians, Lebanese, Jordanians, and Syrians—Jews, Christians, Muslims—will, at the dawn of the new millennium, be unable to conceive of justice and peace apart from full economic development of the Middle East, with numerous infrastructure projects to serve all who live there. This is the policy alternative to that of the present prime minister and his program of budget cuts and austerity.