

Changing the Flag

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March 29, 2014

NEW ZEALAND HAS decided to change its flag. This was only briefly mentioned in the media here. But it is a significant example for us.

The old flag is based on the British one, the Union Jack, which signifies the union of England, Scotland and Ireland. The three different crosses are integrated in an intricate design.

But what does this flag mean for today's New Zealanders? Very little. Sure, they are close to the United Kingdom and to the Anglo-Saxon civilization, but they are a new nation, a separate nation, with a separate history, geopolitical orientation and national character.

A national flag should unite all the citizens of a country, evoke their loyalty and strengthen their patriotism. It certainly should not leave out significant portions of the population.

Therefore the government of the southern island-state has decided to discard the flag that has a meaning only for a part of the population and adopt a new one, which will be meaningful to all. A competition for a new design is under way.

This belatedly follows the example of Canada, another former British "dominion", which discarded a similar flag and adopted a new one, in a wise effort to create a symbol which would appeal both to the English-speaking and the French-speaking Canadians, as well as to the Innu and other indigenous peoples.

THE PROBLEM with our flag is very much the same. Adopted by one of the first Zionist congresses, it is based on the Jewish prayer shawl and the ancient Shield of David. It was designed for a world-wide political movement whose aim was to create a secure homeland for the Jewish people. With the establishment of the State of Israel it became its national flag.

It serves today as the flag of the state, the flag of the international Zionist movement, and, in the eyes of some, the flag of all Jews.

It is not, however, the flag of all of Israel's citizens. For the Arab citizens it means nothing except discrimination and exclusion. It reminds them, everywhere and at all times, that they are at best second-class citizens, present but no quite belonging.

From the first day of the state, I have advocated the

adoption of a new, inclusive flag. Like today's New Zealanders I felt that with all due respect to our origin, history and cultural background, we Israelis live in a different reality. A large number of our co-citizens are not Jewish, and the symbols of our state should reflect this.

Frankly, I also think that it is not a very good flag. Flags should be seen from a distance. Originally, flags were used to mark the place of the king in a battle, so that every soldier knew where his commander was. It should stand out.

The colors of our flag—white and light blue—are aesthetic, but ineffective. Against the background of the blue sky and the white clouds, it almost disappears. Raise together a dozen white-and-blue and a single red flag, and your eyes will be drawn to the red one.

BUT THE main argument against the flag is less aesthetic than political.

Long before Binyamin Netanyahu came up with the ploy of demanding that the Palestinians recognize Israel as the "Nation-State of the Jewish people", our flag already reflected this pretense.

It is much more than the flag of an ordinary state. It embodies the claim of the state to represent all the Jews around the world.

Have the Jews been asked whether they want to be represented by the government of Israel?

Curiously enough, this question is never raised. Not by the Palestinians, not by the Americans, not even by the Israelis themselves.

Before our government demands that the Palestinian leadership recognize Israel as the Nation-State etc, should not the Jews in Los Angeles, Moscow and Johannesburg be asked?

Without a world-wide referendum of the Jewish Diaspora and the affirmative answer of a large majority, the Israeli claim is baseless. Indeed, it is a form of imperialism, an effort to impose by force a kind of sovereignty on a subject people.

Before such a referendum can take place, several questions must be answered: Who is a Jew? A son or daughter of a Jewish mother? What about a Jewish father? People converted to the Jewish religion? By whom? Only by an Orthodox rabbi? What about converts accepted by "re-

form” or “conservative” rabbis? What about atheists, can they become Jews represented by Israel?

About all these questions there is no agreement among the Israelis themselves. So what meaning does the demand for recognition have, except as a ploy to sabotage peace negotiations?

THE QUESTION of a referendum also arose this week in a different context.

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman is restless again. True, his entire ministry is on strike. The main office and all the Israeli embassies in the world are shut. But Lieberman does not rest.

This week he announced that he had instructed the legal advisor of the ministry to submit a legal opinion about his proposal for territorial exchanges. According to his plan, a large area of sovereign Israeli territory inhabited by Arab citizens would be transferred to the future Palestinian state, together with its population, in return for Palestinian areas inhabited by the settlers.

The undisguised purpose of the swap would be to reduce the number of Arab citizens, making the Jewish state more Jewish.

On the face of it, this may be seen as a fair proposal.

First of all, it means that Lieberman is for the establishment of a Palestinian state next to Israel. For an extreme rightist, that by itself is remarkable.

All Israeli ultra-nationalists are facing a dilemma: what is more important, geography or demography? The Jewishness of the entire land which was promised to us by God, or the Jewishness of the population of the Jewish state?

The bulk of the rightist movements prefer the land to the people. They want to keep all the country “from the sea to the river”, even if it means that the Palestinians will be a majority of the population. For them, an eternal occupation would be a good solution, an apartheid state is also acceptable.

Another wing of the rightist camp believes that it is more important to have a state in which the number of non-Jews would be negligible, guaranteeing that the Jewish state would remain Jewish forever. The Lieberman solution is designed to achieve this.

For this purpose, Lieberman is prepared to change the geography of Israel in such a way that the “narrow waist” would become even narrower. Between Netanya on the sea and Palestinian Tulkarem, the state is now only 14 km wide. Lieberman would narrow this even more. Since the narrowness of the state is often quoted as the reason for

annexing the West Bank, this by itself is quite remarkable.

THE LEGAL advisor took his task seriously and produced a long and well-reasoned report. He dealt mainly with the question whether such a solution would be compatible with international law. Nor surprisingly, considering his situation, his answer was yes.

No population would be removed. No property expropriated. The Palestinians living there would be able to retain their Israeli citizenship, if they desire it, as well as their Israeli social security rights. They would just cease being inhabitants of the State of Israel and become inhabitants of the State of Palestine.

A fair, even benevolent solution. Except for one little point: the Palestinian inhabitants would not be asked.

After a thorough study of precedents, the legal advisor concluded that international law does not demand a plebiscite. And indeed, Lieberman strongly objects to any such consultation.

Why? Because the people concerned have already made it absolutely clear that they would refuse such a transfer.

That is a great compliment for Israel. In spite of all the discrimination, in spite of all the justified complaints, the Arab citizens of Israel wish to remain a part of the state, rather than become a part of the future Palestinian state.

Their second-class status is obvious. The news reminds us of it almost daily. What is less obvious, but not less real, is that the Arab population is deeply rooted in Israeli reality, economic and political.

The other side of the coin is that Israel derives large benefits from this population. They work in the Israeli economy. They pay taxes. The argument that they do not pay their share is a myth—one cannot live in Israel without paying taxes, both direct and indirect (unless one is very rich).

MANY COUNTRIES in history have learned that expelling a population is often extremely harmful for the economy. When France expelled the protestant Huguenots, it became a poorer country. Prussia, which invited them in, became rich and powerful. This is even more true for the expulsion of the Jews and Muslims from Spain and Portugal. Both countries deteriorated, while the Ottoman Empire, which embraced the Jews, profited.

The Arab citizens of Israel are a great asset for the state. Far from getting rid of them, we should do everything possible to make them feel at home.

Changing the flag would be a symbolic part of that effort.