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Introducing Inroads 20

As

I WAS WORKING ON THIS ISSUE OF INROADS, MY GRANDDAUGHTER, who is just learning to read, came to my desk to see what I was doing. She noticed the large numbers on the covers of the recent issues of Inroads strewn across my desk and asked “What’s that ‘17’ for?” I explained that we numbered each issue of the journal, showed her “18” and “19,” and asked her what the next issue would be. After thinking for a moment, she said, “20.” Then she commented, “19 is the end of the teens – 20 is an adult number.”

Indeed. With this, our 20th issue, Inroads can safely be said to have passed through its infancy and adolescence into a kind of maturity. We will be marking the occasion next issue, with a retrospective on the 20 issues and 15 years of the journal’s existence. In the meantime, what Inroads has undertaken in the main section of this issue reflects that maturity – a maturity that is all too rare in Canadian public discourse. The four writers (Marc André Boivin, Doug McArthur, Hakan Tunç and Ernie

Regehr) who address the difficult and painful questions relating to the situation in Afghanistan and Canada’s commitment in that country do so in an adult manner: without facile slogans, recognizing that there are no quick solutions, more interested in putting forward constructive proposals than in scoring debating points. If, like so many Canadians, you were disappointed with the debate that took place in Parliament this past spring, we hope you will be more satisfied with what you read in these pages.

Accompanying our discussion of Afghanistan is coverage of another mountainous country that seems remote and impenetrable to Canadians: Nepal. Unlike Afghanistan, Nepal has not been dominating the head-

lines in Canada for the last few months, but that could change as jockeying among the country's three power centres – the royal family, the political parties and the Maoist rebels – proceeds toward a dénouement. Dominic Cardy's main article and shorter pieces by Shrishti Rana and Dane Berry provide a vivid description of the present situation and necessary background for understanding the unfolding drama. Along with the articles we present a selection of photographs by Cynthia Coffill, Dominic Cardy and John Richards, including a four-page colour section.

The Liberal Party of Canada is far from being as impenetrable to Canadians as Nepal or Afghanistan, but it has been better at keeping its internal divisions and dynamics out of the public eye than other parties. But fortunately, not completely. Reg Whitaker, in his 1977 book *The Government Party*, unlocked the mysteries of the party that has governed Canada for most of the past century. Reg has continued to follow Liberal affairs closely, and here interprets the current Liberal leadership campaign for us and assesses its significance for the party and for Canada. Accompanying his piece is a report by the authors of the Canadian Election Study on how foreign policy issues are affecting the fortunes of the federal parties.

Also in this issue:

- Electoral reform is slowly heating up as an issue in a number of Canadian provinces, especially Quebec and Ontario. Undoubtedly the most sophisticated reform proposal to be presented to the Ontario Citizens' Assembly that is currently considering the question is the one by Wilfred Day. Wilf here sets out the principles underlying his version of a Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP)

electoral system for Ontario. In Quebec, feminists have played a major role in the public debate surrounding the Charest government's planned electoral reform. Jackie Steele and Emmanuelle Hébert summarize their arguments. Henry Milner puts all these developments in context.

- A year ago Inroads published interviews with Allan Blakeney and Patrick Monahan about whether the Supreme Court of Canada was overstepping its bounds in interpreting the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Now Gareth Morley, whose interview with Blakeney made an important contribution to the debate, discusses the Court's expansive "unwritten constitutional principles" doctrine – a change of such significance that he calls it Canada's Third Constitution.
- Paul Delany looks at the question of how Alberta should manage its increasing oil riches, and finds lessons in the experience of two European countries that have experienced sudden wealth, Norway and Ireland.
- This past summer the attention of many Canadians turned toward Lebanon, Israel and Palestine as the conflict there ebbed and flowed. Inroads listserv contributors followed this situation closely and debated it passionately. The best of the listserv selection presents some highlights.

Your appreciation of these topics will no doubt be enhanced by the drawings here and there through the issue. These first appeared as editorial cartoons in *Le Devoir*, for whose readers Garnotte's visual spoofs are a daily delight.

— Bob Chodos

Embarrassment of riches

Can Alberta learn from Norway and Ireland?

by Paul Delany

ALBERTA'S ECONOMY HAS BEEN GROWING about twice as fast as that of the rest of Canada, and if oil prices remain high it will continue to do so. The province is turning into a separate kingdom, with per capita income more than 50 per cent above the Canadian average.

But what is the right strategy for managing a prosperity that stems from a finite endowment of oil and gas? One traditional Canadian answer has been to cut the tall poppy down to size. Pierre Trudeau tried to do this with his National Energy Program in the 1980s, and we do it on an ongoing basis through equalization. While there have been calls for a more generous equalization program, Ottawa will probably do no more than tinker with equalization in coming years, while Alberta continues to pull away from the rest of Canada. When we consider its future, we might do well to look at two other societies transformed by recent wealth: Norway and Ireland.

Saving for the future

Their envious neighbours like to call the Norwegians “blue-eyed Saudis,” but the two countries could hardly be more different when it comes to spending their oil money. Saudi Arabia is a country of spectacular consumption by a feudal elite, while everyday work is left to foreign workers with no rights. Norwegians now have the highest per capita GDP in the world; yet as a society, they have been reluctant to enjoy their wealth. More precisely, they plan to spend it later, after most of their oil has gone. Norway's great fear has been of the “oil curse”: wealth that has done more harm than good in the countries possessing it.

Oil was discovered in the Norwegian sector of the North Sea in 1969 and production began in the mid-1970s. Possession of oil contributed to Norway's vote against joining the European Union in 1972, a decision reaffirmed in 1994. By 2000,

Norway had become the third or fourth largest exporter of oil in the world, at more than 3 million barrels a day. Norwegian oil production peaked in 2001 and has been slowly declining. But in terms of revenue, this decline has been more than offset by the quadrupling of oil prices since 9/11. Most of the profits from Norwegian oil flow directly to the state, thanks to the dominant position of the national champion, Statoil.

By the beginning of this century Norway had paid off its national debt, and still the money poured in. In 1990 the Norwegian parliament, the Storting, voted to establish a Government Petroleum Fund to receive excess oil revenues. The fund reached US\$240 billion by the spring of 2006, and it is now growing at about \$3 billion per month. There is \$52,000 in the fund for each Norwegian man, woman and child, and this amount is projected to double by the end of 2009. After that the fund's value is expected to level off as oil reserves are depleted. When the oil is gone, Norway will have the fund as a cushion, a permanent benefit from the fat years of North Sea production.

The first aim of the Petroleum Fund has been to restrain the Norwegian oil boom by shifting consumption from the present to the future. The money going into the fund could have been distributed to the general population, following the example of Alaska's oil dividend program. Norwegians might now be receiving a dividend of about \$8,000 a year each. But their government has feared the twin perils of oil-driven inflation and the social corruption caused by easy money. The oil windfall needed to be sterilized so that it would not have any radical effect on the domestic economy. The

fund therefore decided to invest entirely in foreign assets (initially bonds, later adding stocks and derivatives). It has also chosen to be a passive investor, not taking a big enough stake in any one corporation to exercise control. The fund has acted like a conservative individual providing for his or her old age. This mentality is reflected in a change of name in 2006: the "Government Petroleum Fund" has now become the "Government Pension Fund." Knut Kjaer of the Norges Bank has called it "a tool to help the government face the challenge of an ageing population."¹

The fund's passivity reflects Norway's political culture. Since World War II it has

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been a classic Scandinavian welfare state, with very high taxes, a high cost of living and generous social benefits. The state has enjoyed legitimacy and authority as the guardian of every citizen's welfare. Americans may mistrust government, the French may be angry at it, but Norwegians largely accept it. The directors of the Petroleum Fund have more money at their disposal than the government has, but they don't throw it around. If blessings flowed from the fund, this would usurp the budgetary powers of Norway's elected representatives. Only the state has the right to guide what happens in the economy or culture.

Paul Delany is a Vancouver writer, formerly a professor of English at Simon Fraser University.

An egalitarian society like Norway's will not be disposed to concentrate wealth for any narrow purpose. One should not expect to see in Oslo an art gallery to rival the Getty Museum, though the government is spending more than \$800 million on a new opera house. The Petroleum Fund could do such things with a few months' revenue, but its mandate prevents it doing anything that the government has chosen not to do. Private support for culture is limited, because state management of Norwegian oil has made it impossible for any Norwegian J. Paul Getty to emerge. The government could have set aside a small portion of its windfall to seek excellence in specific areas of culture or

The state has enjoyed legitimacy and authority as the guardian of every citizen's welfare. Americans may mistrust government, the French may be angry at it, but Norwegians largely accept it.

research, but it seems to consider excellence and equity irreconcilable, even when oil money has put excellence within its grasp. The fund is not just designed as a bulwark against inflation or wasteful consumption. It seeks also to prevent new oil wealth from having a radical impact on Norwegian society. In due course, the benefits of the fund will be returned to all Norwegians as they enter old age. Its resources will melt invisibly into the general comfort and prosperity.

Recently, the Petroleum Fund has moved toward activism in one area: investment policy. In 2005, it charged an "Advisory Council on Ethics" with establishing investment guidelines. The council proposed that

the fund should only support "sustainable development": it should not invest in companies that produce arms, violate civil rights or have questionable business practices. One of the council's first acts was to send a series of sceptical questions to Wal-Mart. After the company failed to reply, the Council recommended in November 2005 that the fund no longer hold Wal-Mart shares or bonds. These holdings amounted to \$400 million, about 0.2 per cent of Wal-Mart's capitalization. The divestiture has taken place, along with other fund investments in arms manufacturers and the like. As with any sanction or boycott, the fund's refusal to hold Wal-Mart shares would only have an effect if most other investors threatened Wal-Mart's managers. That is not going to happen, evidently. Still, when Norway's pensioners eventually draw an income from the fund, they will be able to feel that their money is relatively clean (though how much they get will depend on the success of global capitalism).

Taking a stand on corporate ethics is easier than taking responsibility for the strategic development of the Norwegian domestic economy. Norway has been afraid of "Dutch disease," named after the side-effects of the Dutch gas boom in the 1970s. An influx of foreign currency from natural resource exports tends to drive up the recipient country's exchange rate and price its manufactured goods out of their traditional markets. Norway's main industry has been shipbuilding. If oil revenues had not been sterilized through the Petroleum Fund, it is argued, the kroner would have shot up and Norwegian ships would have lost their market. Instead, Norwegian shipbuilders specialized in more complex vessels (including oil rigs), prices have

not risen excessively and the industry has remained healthy. New high-tech ventures have also flourished in Norway.

The Irish miracle

Does the threat of “Dutch disease” mean that oil revenues, unless sterilized, are bound to be a curse for small economies? This is a topical question for Alberta, and for other small jurisdictions open to global movements of trade and capital.

Many small nations or regions – of about two to five million people – are more successful, economically and culturally, than larger and more unwieldy countries. These small entities are well placed to deploy tax arbitrage against larger bodies that they are attached to. The most prominent example is Ireland, which for many years has set its corporate tax rates far below the European Union average. The current Irish rate is 12.5 per cent; larger EU countries are mostly in the 30 to 35 per cent range.

When Ireland entered the EU in 1973, it was relatively poor and without natural resources. But it qualified for EU subsidies, had a young and well-educated population and, after 1999, was the only English-speaking country in the Eurozone. Since the mid-1990s, a boom in foreign investment has pushed Irish GDP per capita above Britain’s, and 20 per cent above the EU average. With just over 1 per cent of the EU population, Ireland has in recent years attracted about a quarter of all U.S. investment in the EU. Per capita wealth is now higher in Ireland than in the United States. The aggressive use of tax arbitrage transformed the Irish economy in a single generation.

The new EU members from eastern Europe are emulating Ireland’s strategy. They too are experimenting with low corporate rates and flat-rate income taxes. Most of them are growing faster than the older members of the EU, while France and Germany complain about a “race to the bottom” by tax-cutters in the east. New investment in manufacturing is more attractive in Hungary or Slovakia than in France or Germany. Like Ireland, the eastern countries may be able to attract European headquarters of U.S. multinationals. Microsoft, for example, funnels all its European profits through Ireland because of its low tax rate. In 2005, Microsoft Ireland reported profits of \$9 billion. Almost all of this money was earned in larger European countries, which were not pleased to see Ireland harvesting tax revenue on their behalf.

Norway could have used its oil revenues to cut its corporate taxes to zero and become the biggest European tax haven of them all. Or it could have cut the consumption taxes that have made it a very expensive country to live in and stifled its tourist potential. But such drastic measures would conflict with Norway’s social democratic sense of fairness and fear of the destabilizing effects of an open door for international corporations. If foreign investment should flood in, Norway would have to move even more of its government revenue offshore as a counterweight; otherwise the kroner would be driven up and the economy would overheat. Nonetheless, sterilization of oil revenue may not be the best strategy in the long run. Norway could have taken advantage of North Sea oil to diversify its economy more aggressively and lay a foundation for long-term growth. The opposition Progress Party wants to break out of the straitjacket

of Social Democratic resource policy, but so far the Norwegian electorate has refused to give it a mandate to do so.

Alberta's options

Not being a sovereign nation, Alberta has fewer tools for handling its oil boom than Norway does. Interest rates and the exchange rate on the Canadian dollar are determined nationally rather than locally. On the other side, labour shortages can be relieved by interprovincial migration. But the main instrument wielded by the government is

Alberta finance ministers have not managed the Heritage Fund according to any consistent plan. Like most finance ministers, they have found it convenient to have different pockets between which to move money as expediency requires.

the provincial budget, supplemented by the Alberta Heritage Fund.

Since 1994, Ralph Klein's government has used oil revenue to strengthen its balance sheet, paying down the provincial debt from \$23 billion to zero. Some oil revenues have also been directed to the Alberta Heritage Fund, a fiscal buffer that currently stands at about \$15 billion (about \$4,500 per capita). Alberta finance ministers have not managed the Heritage Fund according to any consistent plan. Like most finance ministers, they have found it convenient to have different pockets between which to move money as expediency requires. In the current fiscal year, absurdly enough, Finance

Minister Shirley McClellan put \$1.75 billion "surplus" revenue into the Heritage Fund, then took \$1 billion out for program spending. McClellan has earmarked \$750 million added to the fund as an advanced education endowment, intended to reach \$3 billion in coming years. She also added \$500 million to a separate endowment, the Alberta Heritage Fund for Medical Research.

Paying down the provincial debt was a sensible way of managing the flood of oil revenue. It was also a form of sterilization, since most of the money that paid off bondholders was leaving the province. In the past couple of years, though, Alberta fiscal policy has become a muddle. Klein seems to have run out of ideas as his mandate nears its end; meanwhile, the spike in oil prices provides the Alberta finance minister with income on an unprecedented scale. There are three ways of dealing with the revenue windfall: allowing it to pass through to consumption, investing in public works and shifting it into the future through an endowment fund. The 2006 Alberta budget dabbles in all three choices, including a \$400 per capita oil dividend in imitation of Alaska. What is lacking is any coherent strategy for the province's future. Major decisions await Klein's departure at the end of 2006.

As already noted, there is one other way to dispose of the embarrassment of oil riches: equalization across provinces. Here one encounters the arbitrariness of national or provincial boundaries. Norway devotes a higher percentage of GDP to foreign aid than any other country, but still less than 1 per cent. It keeps almost all its oil wealth for itself. At the other extreme, Scotland has about the same population as Norway, but no fiscal independence. Once North Sea oil comes ashore in Scotland, the royalties are



BIG BOOM FOR COWTOWN: No large blocks of office space will be available in Calgary before 2009.

shared by all of the United Kingdom, with a population ten times that of Scotland.

Federal systems represent an intermediate position, but not all federations are the same. In the United States, there is no equalization between states. People equalize themselves, so far as they can, by moving to a better job in another state, or by moving from an expensive state to a cheaper one. Canada does more to help people stay where they are, in the name of preserving their language or culture.

Alberta, nominally in control of its own natural resources, nevertheless faces pressure to share its wealth with the rest of Canada. Newfoundland Premier Danny Williams and Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe have been demanding changes to equalization that would bring further golden showers to the Atlantic provinces and Quebec, and the recently released federal review of

equalization would also make the program more generous.² But strict equality will never be achieved as long as the provinces control their natural resources; nor is it obvious that equalization, in its present form, contributes much to Canada's economic health. In the past, Ontario accepted equalization in exchange for political dominance and support for its manufacturing base. But if Ottawa wanted to make Alberta into a cash cow for less fortunate provinces, it is not clear what, if anything, Alberta would receive in return for slowing down the oil boom in this way.

Alberta could become "Canada's Ireland" by cutting or even eliminating its corporate income tax. Expected revenues from this tax are estimated at \$2.2 billion in 2006–7. The overall surplus is estimated at \$4.1 billion, so elimination of corporate income tax would still leave the Alberta

government in surplus. Such a drastic cut would fuel resentment in other provinces, as corporate head offices moved west. Some U.S. corporations might move to Alberta too: if Alberta had no corporate tax the Canadian federal tax, currently 21 per cent, would be well below the U.S. rate of 35 per cent. Head-office employment in Calgary is already growing steadily, but the westward tilt could speed up.

Other provinces already offer selective tax concessions: for movie production in British Columbia, automobiles in Ontario, Bombardier jets in Quebec. But Alberta could make itself extremely attractive to any established Canadian business with

The main limitation for businesses wanting to move to Alberta is simple lack of capacity. Fort McMurray, the oil sands capital, shows the dire results of trying to put a quart of growth into a pint pot of infrastructure.

sweeping across-the-board tax cuts. Even if it was politically impossible for companies to move, they could still feel the heat. Air Canada, for example, is finding it difficult to keep up with WestJet, which benefits from its low-tax and union-free location in Calgary. The main limitation for businesses wanting to move to Alberta is simple lack of capacity. No large blocks of office space will be available in Calgary before 2009. Fort McMurray, the oil sands capital, shows the dire results of trying to put a quart of growth into a pint pot of infrastructure. In July 2006, Shell Canada reported that costs for its oil sands expansion had increased 50 per cent in one year.³

Oil booms inevitably spill over into the housing market. Prices in Calgary and Edmonton have risen by more than 40 per cent in the past year. Residential construction has to compete with the oil sector for scarce materials and labour. At the same time, housing shortages make it difficult to import workers from other regions, driving up labour costs even more. Interest rates, which are set nationally, cannot rise enough to choke off the boom. Finally, as the housing market heats up, speculators move in from outside the region to buy houses for profit, rather than to live in. Wherever money is available in a boom market at moderate interest rates – as in Alberta, Ireland or London – house prices rise far beyond their normal relation to average incomes. The surge of hot money into the housing market is perhaps the most dangerous side-effect of an oil or finance boom, and it may take a nasty recession to cure the problem.

Rising costs for oil sands development suggest another path to stabilization: simply leave the oil in the ground until it can be produced in a more orderly fashion. Whether or not global oil production is about to peak and then decline, countries such as the United States and Britain are certainly on a downward slope. If supplies remain tight and prices rise on the global market, a country can produce less and still increase its revenues. In the long run, the value of oil left in the ground may be greater than the returns from current production. If the Alberta government believed this, it could stretch out the period of oil sands development simply by delaying permits.

Canadian oil production in 2006 will be about 2.5 million barrels a day, equally divided between conventional oil and oil from the tar sands.⁴ While conventional oil

production is gradually declining, oil sands production is projected to increase to 3.5 million barrels a day by 2015, and most of this extra production will be exported. It is very doubtful that the extra tar sands oil can be brought into production without rampant cost inflation, not to mention environmental damage. Restraint in oil sands development would leave more capacity for Alberta to diversify its economy and direct growth toward the populated south, where it can be accommodated more easily. Alberta's "oil fund" would then contain more oil in the ground and fewer securities purchased after extracting and selling the oil. However, the latest policy statement from Alberta's oil ministry argues for developing the tar sands as fast as possible, even using imported liquefied natural gas to do so.⁵

An explicit policy of holding back tar sands development would arouse hostility from the United States, which is counting on more energy imports from its politically stable neighbour. In the past, few countries have had a conscious policy of restraining oil production. They have preferred to keep pumping and accept whatever the market was willing to pay. Nominally, OPEC has existed to balance oil supply and demand; in practice, few countries have respected their quotas and Saudi Arabia has flooded the market when it feared that prices were getting too high. This situation may be changing now, thanks to political uncertainties in major producers (like Iraq, Iran, Nigeria and Venezuela) and rapid growth in demand from China and India. With overall production of about 85 million barrels a day,

the loss of a million barrels a day is enough to affect the world price. There have been hints that Norway may be quietly holding back production to extend the life of its resource and help keep oil prices firm.

Slowing down the pace of oil sands development would be more than just speculation about the price of oil 10 or 20 years from now. The main argument for restraint is that the Alberta economy cannot grow faster than 5 or 6 per cent a year without major distortions and inflationary bubbles. A tax reduction strategy combined with an oil sands slowdown would redirect that growth: from resource industries to diversified new ventures, from the hinterland to the cities, and from the north to the south. Growth would become more complex, more granular and more sustainable. The best time to start shifting the economy away from oil is when you still have plenty of it left. ■

Notes

- 1 www.norges-bank.no/english/petroleum_fund/articles/lugano/index_lugano_2001.html
- 2 Expert Panel on Equalization and Territorial Formula Financing, *Achieving a National Purpose: Putting Equalization Back on Track* (Ottawa: Department of Finance, 2006). Available online: http://www.eqttf-pfft.ca/epreports/EQ_Report_e.pdf
- 3 "Cost of Athabaska Could Hit \$20 Billion," Toronto *Globe and Mail*, July 6, 2006, p. B1.
- 4 Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, *Canadian Crude Oil Forecast*, 2006.
- 5 See Andrew Nikiforuk's critique, "Plan? What Plan? Alberta's Energy Future," *Canadian Business*, June 5–18, 2006.

A new war, a shaky peace

Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and other sensitive subjects

Selected and edited from the Inroads listserv by Bob Chodos

At

ONE POINT SEVERAL YEARS AGO, WHEN DEBATE ON ISRAEL/PALESTINE had deteriorated into repetition of fixed and incompatible positions, the Inroads listserv declared a moratorium on the topic. But an Inroads listserv moratorium is no more stable than a Middle East ceasefire, and a renewed Israel/Palestine debate erupted this summer – this time including some refreshingly thoughtful contributions. The new listserv debate began before the renewed fighting between Israel and its Palestinian and Lebanese neighbours, and was initially sparked by the vote at the convention of the Ontario division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees on May 27 in favour of a boycott of Israel.

From: John Furedy

June 2

I know that some years ago this topic was ruled out for consideration by the list, but current events such as the recent Ontario CUPE vote for boycotting Israel suggest that perhaps it's time for the list to consider this issue, as it has developed into a global rather than a local problem. I found a recent statement, pasted below, to be a rather clear explication of one side of the argument.

The statement attached to John Furedy's post was an article by American writer and radio talk show host Dennis Prager entitled "Why Anti-Zionism Is Anti-Semitism." It argued that "Zionism is an integral part of Judaism" and suggested that one could no more call for the destruction of Israel without being anti-Jewish than one could call for the destruction of Italy without being anti-Italian.

Retired from the psychology department at the University of Toronto, John Furedy now lives in Australia.

From: Garth Stevenson

June 5

I fully support CUPE's boycott of Israel, for the same reason that I supported boycotts of South Africa under apartheid. This does not imply any disrespect for Judaism, or for the Dutch Reformed Church. Similarly, my sentiments about British atrocities in Kenya in the 1950s (documented in two recent books) do not imply any disrespect for the

Anglican Church. The issue is human rights, not religion.

Zionism, despite its religious trappings, is a political movement whose purpose was and is to create and maintain a European colonial settler state in the Middle East. Not all religious Jews are Zionists, and not all Zionists are religious (Herzl, the founder of the movement, was an agnostic, as was David Ben-Gurion). Herzl conducted a friendly correspondence with Cecil Rhodes, as both understood the similarity between their respective projects. As a matter of fact the idea of forming a Jewish state in the Middle East was first suggested by Lord Palmerston, the same British Prime Minister who started the Opium War in China. Palmerston thought a Jewish colony would be a useful reinforcement for British influence in the region, much as the Lebanese Christian population reinforced the influence of France. British imperialists supported Zionism quite consistently until 1945, when a British Labour Party government reversed the traditional policy. In this respect, as in many others, Britain's imperial role was then inherited by the United States, which has retained it ever since.

The idea that people should "return" to places where their ancestors may have lived two thousand years ago is itself rather bizarre. The Celts (ancestors of the Irish) originated in central Europe and

The Inroads listserv began operating in 1997 as a means to link readers of the journal and others interested in policy discussion. With nearly 130 subscribers, it offers one of the few chances for people of diverse views to grapple with social and political issues in depth.

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the Hungarians originated in central Asia, but I doubt if John Furedy would support “returning” either group to its place of origin. As a matter of fact it is unlikely that European Jews are even descended from the Jews mentioned in the Bible. They are apparently a Turkish tribe, the Khazars, who converted to Judaism in the 7th century of the Christian era. Arthur Koestler, who was Jewish, wrote a book about this 30 years ago and DNA tests have since confirmed it. Judaism is a religion which originated in the Middle East, as did Christianity, but that does not give adherents of either religion a right to settle there and dispossess the existing population. It would be equally sensible to say that all Presbyterians (of whom there are several million in South Korea) are entitled to settle in Scotland and to put the non-Presbyterian Scots in refugee camps.

Garth Stevenson is professor of political science at Brock University.

From: Ian Malcolm

June 5

Garth writes that he supports the boycott of Israel because of human rights concerns and, apparently, because Zionism “is a political movement whose purpose was and is to create and maintain a European colonial settler state in the Middle East.”

This is confusing. First, if he’s concerned about human rights, there are better targets for his concern and CUPE’s elsewhere. That doesn’t mean that he shouldn’t object to Israeli policies or include it on a list of boycotted places, but it would be good to know where in the list of targeted countries it stands. My guess is higher than its rights

record would neutrally put it, bad as it may be in some respects. I wonder sometimes if some people place a priority on criticizing Israel because they think of it as a country “like ours” – as a place that should know better, whereas Syria, Iran and others seem to be lands of irretrievably peculiar people who can’t be expected to behave. But even that slightly weird and quasi-Orientalist position doesn’t seem to be Garth’s own. To the extent that Garth elaborates, he doesn’t mention specific new policies, but – alarmingly – the very existence of the state of Israel. At this point, debating whether Israel should exist may be as historically interesting as debating whether British Columbia should exist. But is Garth suggesting that in the here and now we should base policies on a desire that the country cease to exist?

Ian Malcolm is senior editor for the humanities at the European office of Princeton University Press in Woodstock, England.

From: Gareth Morley

June 5

I think Garth oversimplifies the historical record of Zionism. Up until 1948, the Zionists didn’t have state power, so they obtained land by purchase. This may have sometimes been morally problematic, since the purchase was from the Palestinian aristocrats who “owned” the land, while those evicted were often tenants. Purchase didn’t eliminate ethnic animosity: on the contrary, there were major anti-Jewish riots in the 1930s, and the Palestinian leadership of the time was closely aligned with Hitler and then with the Axis powers.

In 1948 itself, there were plenty of non-consensual movements of peoples (what we would now call “ethnic cleansing”). These

went both ways, as Jews were kicked out of East Jerusalem communities dating back long before Zionism. There was no attempt by the Haganah to remove all Arabs from what was to become the state of Israel, and descendants of Arabs who stayed are citizens of Israel today.

Whether we like it or not, recent history is full of transfers of people that no one wants to reverse. Germans were kicked out of homes they had lived in for centuries in eastern Europe and Prussia after the Second World War. In the twenties, Greeks and Turks expelled each other and committed atrocities. Millions died and millions more were uprooted when India and Pakistan became states, contemporaneously with Israel.

The rights or wrongs of Zionism as a project are irrelevant today. Whether Zionism was a good idea, present-day Israelis live where they live and are entitled to security. It is not as though Canada and Australia, for example, were formed with the consent of their original inhabitants. The Israelis are not, however, entitled to colonize the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

I can see no reason to single out Israel for an academic boycott. Academic boycotts (and sanctions more generally) are stupid anyway, since we are hardly likely to promote a more liberal world by cutting off the flow of ideas and trade. Apartheid didn't end because of sanctions: it ended because, in the wake of the Cold War, leaders on both sides were able to see a solution that was a net gain for both of them. Unfortunately, the likelihood of this happening in Israel/Palestine seems remote.

Gareth Morley is a lawyer in Victoria, B.C.

From: Bob Chodos

June 5

For Dennis Prager (in an article forwarded to the list by John Furedy), Israel is as uncontroversially the land of the Jews as Italy is the land of the Italians. For Garth Stevenson, Israel is simply “a European colonial settler state in the Middle East.” The Israel/Palestine debate somehow seems to lend itself to extreme and incompatible positions, which is why the Inroads list some time ago declared a moratorium on this debate. It is not my intention to continue the debate now, except to respond to one of Garth's points.

“As a matter of fact,” Garth writes, “it is unlikely that European Jews are even

The idea that people should “return” to places where their ancestors may have lived two thousand years ago is rather bizarre. It would be equally sensible to say that all Presbyterians are entitled to settle in Scotland and to put the non-Presbyterian Scots in refugee camps. — Garth Stevenson

descended from the Jews mentioned in the Bible. They are apparently a Turkish tribe, the Khazars, who converted to Judaism in the 7th century of the Christian era. Arthur Koestler, who was Jewish, wrote a book about this 30 years ago and DNA tests have since confirmed it.”

The Khazar theory of Jewish origins has been eagerly seized on by anti-Zionists as a refutation of the Jews' claim to the territory that now forms the state of Israel. The problem with the theory isn't that it's wrong – it could well have some historical basis.

But the evidence for it is nowhere near as conclusive as the anti-Zionists tend to make it out to be, and it is, in any case, essentially beside the point.

Yes, the Khazars did convert to Judaism some time in the early Middle Ages – whether it was the whole people or just the king and the nobles is a matter of dispute. The Khazar empire was eventually conquered by the growing Russian kingdom and the Jewish Khazars faded out of history, perhaps converting to Christianity, perhaps – as Koestler and others have posited – giving rise to the Jewish communities of eastern Europe. The origins of those communities are themselves a matter of some uncertainty. The prevailing theory has been that they were initially

Whether Zionism was a good idea, present-day Israelis live where they live and are entitled to security. It is not as though Canada and Australia, for example, were formed with the consent of their original inhabitants. — Gareth Morley

made up of Jews fleeing persecution in the Rhineland, but some Khazar presence is by no means out of the question. DNA tests have not been any more conclusive than the rather flimsy documentary evidence supporting any of these hypotheses. In any case, the Khazar theory would apply only to Ashkenazi (eastern European) Jews, and not to the Sephardi (Mediterranean) and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) Jews who make up the majority of Israel's Jewish population.

More significantly, any link the Jews of today may have with the Jews of biblical and early rabbinic times is not based primarily

on blood. The main avenue for transmission of the Jewish tradition is not from parent to child but from teacher to student: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and passed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets passed it on to the men of the Great Assembly” (Mishnah, Avot 1:1). My entry point into the Jewish heritage comes through being born to Jewish parents, but a friend of mine of Ontario Scottish origin who is a recent convert to Judaism has just as strong a claim to the heritage as I do. If I have a connection with Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and Rabbi Akiva, it is cultural, intellectual and spiritual, not genetic.

Bob Chodos is managing editor of *Inroads* and a bat/bar mitzvah tutor.

*On June 25, Palestinian militants crossed the border from Gaza into Israel and attacked an army post, killing two soldiers and capturing Corporal Gilad Shalit. Israel responded with a powerful attack on Gaza. On the *Inroads* listserv, André Payant forwarded an article by *Vanity Fair* contributing editor James Wolcott, who in turn quoted from a report by political scientist Virginia Tilley, author of a recent book on Israel/Palestine, in which she described the possible consequences of the Israeli bombardment, including disease, “old people collapsing with heart failure, pregnant women collapsing with spontaneous abortions.” It provoked the following responses.*

From: Barbara Yaffe

July 5

Yet again, the onus of responsibility is put on Israel. Cholera, spontaneous abortions. My God, why don't the Palestinians responsible



CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A Palestinian boy holding Palestine's flag watches Israeli soldiers during a demonstration held near the village of Bil'in. DAVID VAAKNIN PHOTO

just drive the soldier to the border and say, "Beat it"? End of chaos. Rebuilding begins.

Barbara Yaffe is a Vancouver journalist who has written on Middle East issues.

From: Arthur Milner

July 5

"My God, why don't the Palestinians responsible just drive the soldier to the border and say, 'Beat it'? End of chaos. Rebuilding begins."

Yes, why don't they return the soldier? And why don't they stop shelling? Why don't they just give up fighting altogether and accept Israel in Jerusalem and the West Bank and forget the right of return and embrace the fence running through their schoolyards

and the security highways running through their territories and the checkpoints ...

Because if they just accepted Israel then everything would be fine and they could live in peace wherever Israel let them and Israel would give back all the territory they've held on to for 40 years while they've just waited for the Palestinians to stop making a fuss. Don't those silly Palestinians know that the only reason they don't get what they need or want is because they fight for it, and if they just stopped fighting they'd get everything they want, because, you know, no Israeli and no Israeli government has never ever had designs on any of the land of Palestine, or for sure at least on any of the land that the UN gave to the Arabs of Palestine in 1947, or at least any of the land Israel conquered

in 1967, or at least except for Jerusalem and a few small squiggles along the Green Line ...

Arthur Milner is a playwright and member of the Inroads editorial board living in Val-des-Monts, Quebec.

On July 13, a Hezbollah raid across the Israel-Lebanon border opened a second front; this time two soldiers were captured and three killed. Israel responded with extensive air strikes against Lebanon. In Canada, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government supported Israel's actions. Hence an Inroads listserv debate on the government's foreign policy once again led to the Middle East.

From: John Furedy

July 19

When free societies are attacked by fear societies, force, rather than nuance or sneering references to leaders of those free societies, is the only option. England saw this 66 years ago, and abandoned its nuanced position and its sneers against Churchill, as did the Greeks when they finally recognized that Persia had to be resisted with force, rather than being dealt with by nuanced diplomacy.

From: Reg Whitaker

July 20

John Furedy wants – no, demands – an end to “nuance,” to diplomacy, to “sneers” (criticism) directed against our “leaders.” Instead he wants – demands – force, the “only option ...when free societies are attacked by fear societies.”

All this is apparently on behalf of Stephen Harper's policies on Afghanistan and Lebanon. But our Stephen immediately

fades into Churchill standing up to the Nazis and the ancient Greeks resisting the Persian invasions! Call it a leap of faith, or maybe just overheated historical analogies, but it seems to imply that people like myself and Gareth who have offered criticism of Harper's foreign policy are, well, subverting the moral fibre of the nation and making us weak before our enemies. The likes of us will, however, no doubt be shortly swept away as the Churchillian/Spartan figure of Stephen Harper takes command and starts dealing force against Hitler, Darius and Xerxes – whoops! – Mullah Omar and Hassan Nasrallah.

While I might otherwise be alarmed by this whiff of authoritarianism (it is apparently the duty of citizens to line up behind our leaders, never “sneer” at what they tell us, and charge into the breach at their command), I am rather inclined to think this all a bit silly. After all, when the Brits chose to take on Churchill as PM, Hitler's Wehrmacht was sweeping over Europe and his Luftwaffe was dropping bombs on Britain. When the Greeks rallied their city-states together to resist Persia, the Persians had attacked with one of the largest land and naval forces ever assembled at that time in the ancient world, with the express purpose of conquering Greece. In neither case was it very difficult to persuade reasonable people that force was required to resist.

But consider our Stephen. Canadian troops are in Afghanistan because remnants of a regime we tossed out by military force five years ago are back causing trouble. There may have been good reason at the time for chasing the Taliban, but right now we find ourselves in a very messy, bloody, complex – yes, nuanced – place replete with warlords, drug lords, massive poverty, cor-

ruption, broken promises of nation-building assistance, etc., etc., and Canadian forces with scarcely a clue about how to navigate this, um, well, nuance.

Harper sees geopolitical objectives being met by our continued presence. Hence our boys and girls in uniform are out there taking the bullets and the bombs, and some are coming back in bags. The argument for further commitment is, at the very least, debatable, and should be debated, but is not, because people like John Furedy want to halt debate and nuance and demand instead wartime purpose and dedication – hence flinging nonsensical analogies like 1940 and 490 BC.

On Lebanon, the Furedy claim is even more absurd. Hezbollah, a regional Shia Lebanese force with a longstanding quarrel with Israel stemming from the 1982 Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon, takes two Israeli soldiers (“captures”, “kidnaps”, who cares?) to try to force a prisoner exchange. Israel retaliates by wreaking havoc on all of Lebanon, Christian, Sunni, Shiite, even Canadian tourists, a response our PM judiciously refers to as “measured.” Furedy may think this utterance Churchillian. Many of us think it plain dumb. But in any event, by what fevered stretch of the imagination can Hezbollah, caught up in the vicious war in southern Lebanon, or for that matter Hamas, penned into the blazing hellhole of Gaza, constitute a Hitlerian or Persian-style threat to the very existence of our free society?

I trust that Stephen Harper, however ideologically driven, is too intelligent to see himself as a heroic Spartan standing at Thermopylae against the Asiatic hordes sweeping toward the heart of Western Civilization. I suspect that there is in Harper

an admixture of high, if delusional neo-con, principle and narrow political calculation centring on the politician’s horizon, the next election – which may or may not also be delusional. To the Furedys of this world, this is Armageddon. I say it’s spinach.

A final note. Furedy counterposes “free societies attacked by fear societies.” Given the grotesque exaggeration of the threats posed to Canada by addled Afghan mullahs and demented Shiite Lebanese gangsters, which are the “fear” societies?

Reg Whitaker is a British Columbia writer and commentator and a member of the Inroads editorial board.

From: Gareth Morley

July 20

There are a lot of possible responses to Professor Furedy’s post. One would be that he should get a calendar that allows for years other than 1938. In fact, one of the lessons of Munich surely is the danger of rigidly applying the “lessons of the past” to the present. French and British leaders in 1938 understandably were shaped by the lessons of August 1914, but those turned out not to be appropriate for the situation they were in.

The more fundamental question Furedy raises with his distinction between free and fear societies is whether internally liberal-democratic societies should be judged, in their external conduct, differently from other, more authoritarian regimes. I have yet to see an actual argument for why they should. The Persian Wars don’t help – frankly, I don’t think “fear society” and “free society” is a useful division in antiquity (the Hebrew Scriptures seem pretty clear that the Persians were a lot

better than the Greeks in respecting Jewish religious liberties). But what could be more of a “fear society” than Sparta? Sparta and Athens allied against the Persians basically out of the same motivation that the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and liberal Arabs have for cheering Hezbollah – ethnic solidarity against a foreigner they perceive as bent on ruling over them.

Thucydides is pretty darn clear that Athens, however internally democratic, was brutal with its allies. The Melian Dialogue in Book 5 of *The Peloponnesian War*, however unlikely as a record of actual speeches, shows what Athens was capable of.

In more modern times, there have been plenty of peoples who are internally liberal

It is a huge mistake to interpret a fundamentally ethnic conflict about land – blood and soil – as an ideological conflict about systems of government. — Gareth Morley

but brutal – even genocidal – to those they exploit: Belgium in the Congo, Britain in Tasmania or Ireland, America in the Philippines.

It is a huge mistake to interpret a fundamentally ethnic conflict about land – blood and soil – as an ideological conflict about systems of government. Israel, sensibly enough, does not want to see a democracy in Jordan or Egypt. More democracy in Turkey has been a huge complication in its relations with its former close ally, as of course was the overthrow of the Shah in Iran. And I believe there was a relatively free election in the Occupied Territories recently – does anyone remember what happened there?

Anyway, Lebanon is a democratic – if disordered – state. The IDF is flattening whole villages, destroying civilian infrastructure well outside territory controlled by Hezbollah, and basically treating the Lebanese population as a whole as enemies, as the reaction of traditionally pro-Israel Maronites shows.

It is outrageous that Harper is neglecting his primary duty as Canadian PM, which is to safeguard the lives of Canadian nationals. Were I a Conservative partisan, I would also be worried – I can’t imagine this sort of thing is going to fly in Quebec.

From: John Furedy

July 20

I think that Sharansky’s distinction between free and fear societies is the more fundamental one, and that’s the one I’ve been using throughout my posts. It’s true that democracy and freedom (of speech) are correlated, and Athens was the first organized society to originate both concepts, the latter concept being exemplified by Socrates. But note that Socrates was (unjustly) condemned to death by fully democratic means, and did not approve of democracy or, as Plato called it, “the mob.”

Similarly, current politicians refer in a confusing way to democracy, because that’s rhetorically effective and has a grain of truth to it, but, as Gareth notes, Hamas was voted in democratically in Gaza, and, of course, Hitler was also elected democratically in 1933. The critical thing is to what extent freedom is preserved in a society, and not whether its leaders were democratically elected. That freedom is considerable in Israel, and very limited, to say the least, in countries that surround it (Turkey is probably second best at the moment). In the



CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST: Shoes thrown by protestors in London demonstrating against the war in Lebanon – the shoes were thrown to represent the children killed in the war. The demonstration was held outside Downing Street, London, August 2006. JAMIE MARLAND PHOTO

Greece-vs.-Persia case, there is no question that Greek society was more free than the Persian one, just as there is no question that in 1940 English society was more free than German society (and, of course, to use Sharansky's own life-experience example, the U.S.A. was more free than the USSR).

So, yes, I do think free societies have a "special moral licence," and even if you don't agree, I hope you agree that their actions should at least be judged by the same moral standard. So, while both Israel and its opponents kill civilians, the former attempts to avoid unnecessary killing (though often does not succeed), whereas the latter specifically target civilians. That's a distinction that even the G8 is coming to recognize.

From: Henry Milner

July 24

I am reluctant to enter this discussion, but I am becoming disturbed by the tone it is taking, and the use of inappropriate metaphors and analogies. I understand that people are dismayed by what they see happening in Lebanon. But I think it important, especially at this time, to maintain perspective and place the actions in context.

Let me try to outline my own position. I will not try to justify the particular military actions taken by Israel. I am sure some cannot be justified, and that overall they are "disproportionate." Nevertheless, I do not see much choice other than Israel taking military action against Hezbollah.

I think that those on the listserv who condemn it outright are seeing it in the context of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. I do not. In my view, Israel deserves much criticism on this score, since it has never tried hard enough to come to a just settlement with the Palestinians – and a good part of the time it didn't try very much at all. Hence I do not think Israel's reinvasion of Gaza after the soldier was kidnapped was justified, since it has other means of putting pressure on the Palestinians. Palestinian militants there may have support from Damascus and Tehran but Israel effectively controls what comes in and out – and much else besides.

In the case of Hezbollah, we have an entirely different situation. This is a military organization with a growing arsenal aimed at Israel, whose leadership is committed to its disappearance as a state. Hezbollah has no state of its own, but it operates entirely at will in a neighbouring state and is armed and supported by two other states in which the most powerful elements of the government favour the disappearance of the state of Israel.

Hence I see no meaningful response for Israel to a military provocation from Hezbollah except a military one. Of course, no meaningful response at all is also an option; but I suggest that it would constitute nothing more than putting off the inevitable since Hezbollah would have no reason not to engage in such adventures in the future while, in the meantime, building up its arsenal.

Henry Milner is a professor of political science and co-publisher of *Inroads*.

From: Philip Resnick

August 11

The mystery of Israel. As war rages in Lebanon and the Galilee, and the media of the world are once again transfixed by a Middle East that refuses to behave like a Switzerland or a Canada, one can contemplate the strange fate of Israel. Where once the right was afflicted with a primordial case of judeophobia, Jews as the killers of Christ, their contemporary successors, some out of fundamentalist belief in apocalypse and rapture, others out of a neoconservative credence in civilizational conflict, embrace an Israeli state that can do no wrong. Where once the left saw in Israel the rebirth of a people decimated in the cauldrons of Hitlerian Europe, its contemporary successors see in it little more than a cat's paw of Western imperialism, the oppressor of the Palestinians and the butcher of Beirut.

What strikes me in the ongoing fascination with the Middle East conflict, not only by the punditry but by public opinion at large, is the central place that a tiny state of barely 6.5 million people occupies in the *imaginaire* of the contemporary world. Why should this be so? There are other conflicts, more brutal in terms of the numbers of slaughtered or their sheer destructiveness than the Arab-Israeli conflict, that briefly make it on to the world radar screen – e.g. Chechnya, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone – only to quickly disappear again. There are regimes far worse than that of Israel: Burma comes to mind, or Uzbekistan, or Sudan, or Zimbabwe, yet these gain only passing attention in the larger scheme of things. Israel lingers on, through good years and bad, good wars and bad, enjoying the kind of attention an Andy Warhol would have died for.

There is, of course, a geopolitical explanation for all this, the strategic importance of the Middle East as the petroleum reserve of the world, a resource whose importance can only increase exponentially as it begins to run out, and as industrialization and urbanization spread to countries large and small. If Israel were located in some obscure corner of Europe or North or South America, or Oceania, there would be less reason to pay it attention. As the composer Stravinsky once said about Poland, if you put up a tent in the middle of 5th Avenue, you are going to get run over. If you establish a non-Muslim state in a region that is overwhelmingly Arab or Muslim and has oil as its chief resource, you are going to have some difficulty winning recognition from your neighbours.

This has certainly been the case of Israel ever since 1948, and it bears its part of the blame for this, though the Arab states and the Palestinians do as well. Israel has not exactly gone out of its way to ingratiate itself with its neighbours, least of all the Palestinians. For example, it could have acted graciously after the 1967 Six Day War, returning the occupied territories to Arab, and preferably to Palestinian, hands, as Ben-Gurion for one was to briefly argue, but the appetite for territorial expansion had been born. Israel could have returned the Golan Heights to Syria ten years ago, and we would probably not be hearing about Hezbollah today. But then Nasser could have chosen not to threaten to close the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping in 1967, just as Hamas or Hezbollah could have chosen not to kidnap Israeli soldiers in recent months.

But all this is neither here nor there, political speculation about what might

have been, rather than about the here and now. And the here and now remains an intractable conflict between two contenders, each convinced the other is out to destroy it, with little willingness to refrain from the recurrent use of force.

Where will it all end? With a ceasefire of some kind, no doubt, until the next crisis comes along. As for the mystery of Israel, it will continue to fascinate, and not only because of the geopolitical stakes that are involved. For there may be something metaphysical at work as well, the extraordinary hold of the biblical narrative for those steeped in the monotheistic creeds,

There are regimes far worse than that of Israel, yet these gain only passing attention in the larger scheme of things. Israel lingers on, through good years and bad, good wars and bad, enjoying the kind of attention an Andy Warhol would have died for. — Philip Resnick

the oddly familiar resonance of place names such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, or Har Megiddo – i.e. Armageddon – even for those of a sternly secular disposition. Like Troy or Marathon, Salamis or Rome, these have seared themselves into the cultural heritage of the West and, regardless of where we stand on the Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Lebanese conflict, they do not leave us indifferent.

Philip Resnick teaches political science at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and is a member of the Inroads editorial board.

Philip Resnick's posting is, not unexpectedly, among the most thoughtful and interesting I have seen on this list in recent weeks. And I think he is right in his answer to the question. While it might be tempting for old lefties to seek a materialist explanation (oil) for the Western world's fascination with Israel/Palestine, I do not think that explanation is adequate. It has far more to do with the religious traditions which are so fundamental to Western culture. Nowhere is this more so than among English-speaking Protestants, whose culture owes as much to the King James Bible as the culture of Arabic-speaking Muslims owes to the Qur'an. From Cromwell and Milton through the Marquis of Lorne (Governor General of Canada in the 1870s and author of a hymn in which "Israel" is used metaphorically for the English-speaking peoples themselves) to, in their different ways, George W. Bush, Tony Blair and Ian Paisley, the obsession has persisted. There is even a sect, the British Israelites, who believe that the Brits are literally descended from the people whom Moses led out of Egypt! And, as I wrote once before on this list, Lester Pearson, a clergyman's son, admitted in his memoirs that memories of Sunday school influenced the way he approached the question of Palestine at the United Nations.

Nor is it difficult to understand why enthusiasm for Israel has moved so dramatically from the left to the right. Until its victory in 1967 Israel could plausibly be portrayed as the underdog surrounded by stronger opponents, and as a social democracy in its internal politics. The ethnic cleansing that had accompanied its foundation, and the discrimination against the

Palestinian minority within the state, were not widely known outside of the Middle East, and memories of the Nazi holocaust were still fresh. Even the fact that the USSR had supported the partition of Palestine in 1947 (for reasons that are still obscure) gave Israel a certain cachet of respectability. To be honest, I was sympathetic to Israel myself in the spring of 1967. But I certainly never imagined in those days that it would still be occupying the West Bank and the Golan Heights almost four decades later; that it would have planted several hundred thousand colonists on the occupied territory; that it would have invaded Lebanon, the weakest and most harmless of its neighbours, no fewer than five times; or that it would still be claiming underdog status when it was armed with nuclear weapons and when Egypt had become a docile and harmless camp follower of the United States. Nor did I foresee the fresh wave of immigrants that it would acquire, with American help, from a collapsing USSR, or the unpleasant impact that those immigrants would have on Israel's domestic politics and foreign policy.

In September, with a fragile ceasefire in place between Israel and Hezbollah, discussion on the listserv turned to the question of whether the United States and its allies should negotiate with the Taliban in Afghanistan. John Furedy argued against negotiation, invoking the parallel of Britain's response to Hitler at the outset of World War II. Gareth Morley, suggesting that "negotiation is not the equivalent of surrender," wrote, "I don't know why I bother arguing with someone who just repeats 'Hitler!' and 'Appeasement!' to everything." Once again, the discussion came back to Israel and its neighbours.



CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST: Israeli soldiers (border police) praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.
STEVEN ALLAN PHOTO

From: Reg Whitaker

September 16

Gareth writes, “I don’t know why I bother arguing with someone who just repeats ‘Hitler!’ and ‘Appeasement!’ to everything.”

Indeed. Why bother? Which is why I have stopped participating in a “debate” driven by people who keep jabbering on about “Islamofascists” and “terrorists” as if these are words that once uttered should simply stop all discussion. After all, as the President of the United States said so memorably, “You’re either with us, or you’re with the terrorists.” Matching wits with people who argue like this is like, well, engaging in a Socratic dialogue with a brick wall. At least it feels good when you stop banging your head.

I live in a universe in which all mortals are mixtures of good and bad, strengths

and weaknesses. In which states are states, not embodiments of universal and eternal principles of morality. In which states pursue, competently or incompetently, smartly or stupidly depending on their leadership, their national interests, or what they conceive their national interests to be. In pursuit of which they quite often fuck up spectacularly, usually at huge human cost. I also live in a universe where there are other forces trying to achieve the status of states (don’t even bother asking why) and use whatever methods are available to them, with the same mixed results as their mentors who claim state status. The result is normally a major league mess, but certainly a situation in which assigning morality is like trying to reconstitute the original eggs after they have been scrambled in the pan.

There are apparently others – quite probably the vast majority of the planet's population, if we look at the evidence – for whom there are the Forces of Light (Us) and the Forces of Darkness (Them). So to some at least, Israel is the Chosen State of God and, no matter what, can never do wrong – by definition. Hezbollah and Hamas, by contrast, are Islamofascists and Terrorists, and thus no vituperative dehumanization and demonization can be too extreme. Anything done to them is justified, but everything they do against the Chosen State is evil, and thus grounds for even more applications of the Lord's Terrible Swift Sword. Of course, there are a few hundred million others who think the exact opposite, but they are Them, not Us, and therefore wrong.

Do I caricature? I don't think so. To those who shout "Appeasement!" to every attempt to debate the complex real world, it really is either "us" or the "terrorists."

With this in mind, I hereby declare that if that's how it is, then I am, I guess, with the terrorists. With those who don't give a rat's ass for the phoney morality of those who bomb the shit of a neighbouring country because they took two of your soldiers captive to try to work an exchange. Who have no time for a state that has its own nuclear weapons saying it is willing to go to war to stop another neighbouring state from obtaining nuclear weapons – all in the name of a higher sanctimony of international "law." With those who think that when people choose their own representatives, that's democracy, whether or not it's acceptable to the guys with the bigger guns and the air force.

Terrorists, if you like. Whatever. But it's no use banging your head against that brick wall and calling it a debate.

This trouble with Reg's post is that it utterly ignores both the actions and the professions of the people we're all talking about. That real people are all mixtures of good and bad is true, but it not very interesting here. What is interesting here is: what do we do about people who say and do certain things? The particular set of people we are referring to as Islamic terrorists are called that because (a) they in fact are terrorists, as evidenced by their actions, and (b) they do this in the name, on their *own* say-so, of Islam. Yes, of course there are lots of people who call themselves Muslims and who, let us assume, in some relevant sense *are* Muslims, who do not accept the sort of slogans and claims that the people we are worried about do profess to accept – so what? The ones we are worried about have those properties and we are worried about them because they do.

We are not worried about what the Israelis will do to us because we know what their professions and actions are, and their actions are very substantially consistent with their professions – as is true also of the terrorist-types.

So it's not a matter of caricature. I have no doubt whatever that deep inside the souls of these folks who are doing their best to murder us are nice people who, if only this, that and the other, would act accordingly. However, that is too deep for us: before we get to the bottoms of their souls, they will have driven a truck full of high explosives into a bunch of us. Perhaps Reg lives in a world in which we shouldn't worry our heads about such things. We don't, however.

Jan Narveson is professor emeritus of philosophy at the University of Waterloo.

From: Ian Malcolm

September 18

Reg is saying is that he dislikes moral oversimplification so intensely that he is going to embrace it. His justification for this contradictory position is that everybody else is engaged in Manichean thinking. If that's the case, he says, why shouldn't he join in, even though he hates it?

This is the morality of the businessman who says: "Sure I hate embezzlement, but everybody else was doing it, so I joined in. I wasn't going to be naive. It's the way of the world."

Yeats wrote of a world where the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity. Reg seems to suggest the world contains only the latter. But isn't it the case, despite Yeats and Reg, that many good people have convictions, try to express them with subtlety and fairness, and don't let their emotions carry them to extreme positions? It's too bad if we give up trying to be like them.

From: Reg Whitaker

September 18

It looks like I made a mistake. I forgot that irony is out of fashion in these earnest times. The problem is that explaining irony is a bit like explaining a joke: the humour is lost both in the telling and in the explanation.

When I said that I was taking the side of the terrorists, I thought that the only people who would take that literally were precisely the brickwallers who insist that "you're either with us or with the terrorists" and who respond to any suggestion of talking or negotiating with the "terrorists" by labelling it appeasement of Evil. Unfortunately, those who do argue more nuanced positions seem also to have taken me literally.

For the record, I have not gone over to the Dark Side à la Dick Cheney, and I have not engaged in embezzlement (even intellectual embezzlement). And I am more than happy to talk to people in other solitudes.

But here is a test. I say that Hamas, as the democratic choice of the Palestinian people, should be recognized as the Palestinian Authority. I say that Hezbollah is a legitimate representative of the Lebanese Shia community. Since they are a force that has now beaten the vaunted IDF twice (when they forced out the Israeli occupiers in the late 1990s and again in the Israeli invasion of 2006), the Israelis and the Americans would do well to sit down with Nasrallah and talk seriously. I say that Ahmadinejad is the democratically elected president of Iran, that Iran is the only winner of the Americans' Iraq fiasco, and that the Americans should consequently sit down and talk seriously with him, while leashing the Israelis who already have their own nukes. I say that the Afghan mission is quickly shaping up to be a bloody quagmire not unlike Iraq and that, yes, talking to the Taliban would be a reasonable idea. Or, I point out that if you don't make peace with your antagonists, who the hell do you make peace with? Then the brickwallers start shouting "Appeasement!" and suggest that I am anti-Semitic or a loony leftist or a tool of the Devil. So I shrug and say, "Okay, call me what you want; you will anyway."

Trying to make an impression on a brick wall just hurts your head. All others willing to discuss on reasonable terms (emotional trump cards checked at the door) are welcome. ■