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Conservatives
in the European Parliament

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Palestine

As part of an EP Delegation, I visited Palestine and the West Bank just before Christmas and, as promised, report my reactions to you.

We went to East Jerusalem, Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah and were supposed to go to Gaza. We met representatives of Fatah, Hamas, the Palestine Legislative Council and the Deputy Representative of the Quartet (The Representative being Tony Blair, only, surprise, surprise, he wasn't there!). We were under no instruction or pressure from any faction and we saw what we wanted to see - with the exception of Gaza, where at the last minute and for no good reason, the Israelis prevented us from going.



The Wall



Israeli occupation of a Palestinian home (note the wrecked belongings thrown out)

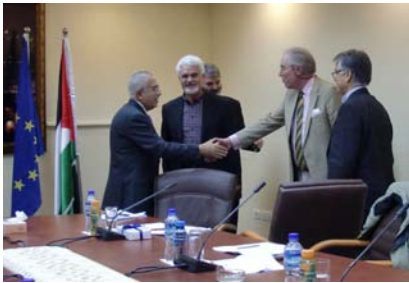


Palestinians Only!



Closed! By order of the Occupying Power

I have to say that, throughout the trip, I was appalled at the treatment meted out to the Palestinians by the Israeli Occupying Force. The privations, restrictions and humiliations that they have to endure - separate buses, separate checkpoints, special permits, a 1/5th of the fresh water available to Israelis, the violent and cruel theft and occupation of their homes and much else besides - is intolerable and unacceptable. And as for the wall - so redolent of Berlin and Belfast - and the wholly illegal new settlements, which are in clear defiance of UN resolutions and common humanity, I was reminded of how oppressors throughout the centuries have behaved. Israel, of all countries, surely should know what cruelty and suffering does to the oppressed. Unless the Occupying Power ceases to divide the West Bank in its own ethnic interest, withdraws its forces to the 1967 borders and agrees to a real and effective two-state solution, then I fear more violence is inevitable.



**Meeting the PM of the Palestine
Legislative Council**



The Mosque of the Dome of the Rock

And as for Gaza... I was told by the Swedish Ambassador (then representing the EU Presidency) that we were barred from going there because the Israeli authorities did not want independent politicians to see the carnage and squalor that their actions had produced.

The Quartet (EU, UN, USA, Russia) Representative and office is a complete charade. Everyone of any substance that we met, from every walk of life, expressed this view and, when we had discussions with Quartet officials, we soon agreed with that collective judgement. \$4.9 million p.a, eighteen staff and a suite in the best hotel in East Jerusalem and the sum achievement? Another mobile telephone company has been given a franchise. It is a typical Tony Blair operation - all mouth and trousers and little or nothing done!

Barrow Students

Barrow 6th Form College paid their annual visit to Parliament during Strasbourg week and, as usual, it was instructive and enjoyable to discuss issues of the day with a number of alert and inquisitive young people. The teachers at Barrow are to be congratulated on the efforts that they make on this regular excursion and I do wish that other academic institutions would take the same trouble on behalf of their students.

Strasbourg

The pre-Christmas session in Strasbourg was almost fun. Plenty of snow and freezing temperatures made this ancient cathedral city very attractive and French seasonal decorations were both restrained and very elegant. Mulled wine enjoyed at my visit to the Christmas market was quite a contrast to the week in Palestine!



Christmas Lights

Travel Problems

I have been lucky in my travel during this recent bout of snow and ice but I know that many of my colleagues - and you - have been in severe and delaying difficulties. I just missed the closure of Manchester airport and do not use Eurostar, but one MEP was stuck in the tunnel for 10 hours! Accidents and problems do occur but why, oh why, do travel company officials always fail to tell people what is happening? Is this a uniquely British disease, that we are fearful of giving anything away or that we might be proved wrong later? We simply must improve. Most travellers will put up with endless delays and difficulties if they are told regularly what is going on!

Bury South

I went to support Michele Wiseman (and David Nuttall), our PPCs in Bury last week when William Hague came to energise the activists. He has taken on the task of getting round our Northern marginal seats and, as usual, gave excellent value for money. I spent Christmas with his most recent book on William Wilberforce and a right good read it were!



Bury PPCs

Bunbury Soiree

Just before the Recess, I spoke at an excellent Supper Club in the Bunbury Ward of the Eddisbury Association. It was in the home of the mother of Owen Patterson (MP

for N. Shropshire) and was a poignant occasion as she had died in the preceding week. Being a stalwart supporter, she demanded that the event go ahead regardless of her declining health and a rousing toast to her memory was accorded to her son. How's that for a commitment to the Conservative cause?

Parliamentary Inquisitions

The hearings into the suitability of potential Commissioners have been in progress over the last fortnight and the first was Baroness Ashton, who has been appointed the EU's Foreign Minister under the terms of the Lisbon Treaty. Frankly, all I could give her was a mere "pass" as she evaded all the complex questions and was just adequate on the fundamentals. She may yet struggle to be approved by a majority of MEPs and, as at least one candidate has withdrawn due to failing her inquisition, Lady Ashton is not certain of her post just yet.



Baroness Ashton performs

Transport Security

Border security has featured large on everybody's agenda just recently, following the foiled Detroit aircraft plot. There is quite a struggle between those who believe that more intelligence and more intrusive checks are required and those who worry about human rights and ethnic implications. I hope the former wins.

Robert Atkins
