

# ACADEMICS IN WONDERLAND

Imagine a country with separate school systems for its two major communities, but the universities are open to both, where students and staff from both communities work and research together right across the range of the university curriculum. Their research improves the life of minority groups in their society. Together they tackle problems in basic sciences, ecology and medicine, equipping students from both communities to be doctors, teachers, lawyers, entrepreneurs and IT specialists.

Imagine you were a terrorist wanting to attack this society. The universities would be an obvious target as living examples of inter-racial coexistence. And so indeed they are. A suicide bomber attacked the cafeteria of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, killing Jews and Arabs as they eat and discussed together. Universities in Israel are the main forum of liberal discussion between Jews and Arabs, seeking to put right all the wrongs of their society as students do the world over, to improve the lot of minority groups like Bedouins in the Negev, to beat malaria and other diseases in Gaza and the Jordan valley, to assist agriculture in arid third world countries.

But now imagine you are a university academic in a liberal democracy like Britain. Surely this model of university life in a multi-racial community is one you would cherish and support. But no, with extraordinary perversity a group of university trade unionists in conference last month voted to support a boycott of universities in Israel with intent to cut them off from all contact with students, staff and researchers in other universities.

The madness of this boycott policy, inspired by demonic or anti-Semitic motives or simple left-wing bloody-mindedness according to your viewpoint, came to me with fresh force when I met Mohammed Darawashe, director of external relations for the Abraham Fund in Israel. He is visiting London for a week to meet with Christian, Jewish and Muslim groups and has a remarkable story to tell about the Israeli Arab community. These are the 164,000 leftovers, as he calls them – Arabs who stayed home in Israel in 1948 when others fled to neighbouring countries like Jordan and Lebanon. Many were farmers, waiting for their crops to ripen and harvest, and so stuck in Israel without political or economic leadership of their own.

They were an anomaly as Arabs in a predominantly Jewish state. As citizens of Israel they wanted equal rights in the new state. Gradually they gained acceptance and in 1992 a turning point came when Prime Minister Rabin formed a government with just 56 seats out of the 120 seats in the Knesset. Mr Rabin turned to the Arab community as a safety net. They came to his aid and brought their shopping lists – new schools in Arab towns, greater expenditure on Arab education - in exchange for support in the Knesset on this measure or on that.

The Israeli Arabs had become shareholders in the new enterprise, if not yet equal shareholders. Another milestone followed a decade later when the Orr

Commission appointed by the Israeli Government reported in 2003 that the clashes between Israeli Arabs and the police were the result of systematic discrimination against Arabs since 1948. They also criticised Arab leaders for their role as inciters and demanded changes in policing, education and the civil service. Discrimination stopped being just an Arab issue and became a mainstream problem of the State.

There is now a cabinet minister from the Arab community – not just for Arab affairs but for science, sports and culture for the nation as a whole, Arab members of the Finance and Foreign Affairs committees, an Arab Deputy Speaker of the Knesset, and 4.6% of civil servants are Arab, up from just 1% seven years ago. It is still less than their proportion of citizens overall at 16% but greatly improved.

And that was Mohammed Darawashe's message. The bad news is there is still discrimination. The good news is that government recognises the problem and it is less than it was. Indeed, he argued, there is no need for further legislation but for improved implementation – and that is where the Abraham Fund comes in.

Originally it helped on the classic model, finding good practice among scores of cross-community projects and helping them with additional resources. But now while continuing that work it focuses on policy initiatives – teaching Arab language and culture in 130 Jewish schools, training government officials by taking them to Arab Israeli towns – I suppose taking Whitehall bureaucrats to Burnley so that they understood the local impact of their decisions would be the English equivalent. Another initiative is supporting new police stations in Arab towns and training their staff as service providers rather than the controlling arm of government, with the best international experience from comparable communities, say in Northern Ireland.

A town leaders forum, religious leaders forum and women's leadership forum are other initiatives to spread good practice among the Israeli Arab community.

Mohammed Darawashe never pretended all their problems were solved. But these examples of creative ways to tackle disadvantage and promote equality in Israel made me feel sick when I thought of British trade union attitudes. The conference decision in the universities is perverse but there is a risk that boycotts would spread from the crazy fringe to trade unions that really carry clout, like Unison. It is time to get real, to see what is really being done by people who care in Israel, and to support not boycott their endeavours.

**Geoffrey Smith**