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Circular No. B42/75

July 1, 1975

To Bureau members

[REDACTED] ENGLISH ONLY

SOCIALIST INTERNATIONAL FACT-FINDING MISSION TO THE MIDDLE EAST

March 9-16, 1974

Amendments proposed by British Labour Party

Further to Circular No.B32/74, Ron Hayward has submitted a number of amendments and corrections to the report on the visit of the Mission to Egypt, Syria and Israel, as contained in a letter, copy of which you find attached.

As there have been no objections from other members of the Mission to the proposed amendments and corrections, the final report will be amended and corrected accordingly.

The Labour Party

BUREAU

from R. G. HAYWARD, CBE
General Secretary

Transport House Smith Square London SW1P 3JA
01-834 9434
Giro No. 510 9213

3 February, 1975.

Mr. Hans Janitschek,
General Secretary,
Socialist International,
88a St. John's Wood High Street,
London, NW3 7SL.

Dear Hans,

Thank you for your letter of 30 January regarding the Socialist International Fact-Finding Mission to the Middle East.

Our objections are that the Report seems a little one-sided and in the main gives the impression that the members of the delegation were somewhat mute during the various consultations and meetings that took place, with only Chancellor Kreisky being articulate!

I take it that Ambassador Dr. Hans Thalberg took full notes during the Mission, and whilst I could not claim to have done this my memory is reasonably good.

In the middle of page 6 it is stated that I made a short statement. In fact the statement took nineteen minutes. I apologise for its length, although you will remember that it was well received and commented on at some length by my friend, the Egyptian Minister of Ideology.

On the same page it is stated that you gave a general description of the policies and programme of the Socialist International emphasising the need for closer co-operation between the Socialist International and the Arab and African socialists. This is correct; you made a very good statement, but you also pointed out some of the difficulties under our present statutes in bringing this about.

With regard to the paragraph on page 7 dealing with our meeting with Deputy President Mahmous Fawzi, you will recollect that one of the most important points he made to us was that in his view there would be only a very limited number of Arabs (as compared to the high figures being bandied about) who would wish to return to Israel to their previous homes, if the Israelis allowed this, as a large number of them had settled down in Arab States, had obtained homes and jobs and would not wish to move.

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On page 8, second paragraph, it is stated that members of the delegation enquired whether Syria acknowledged the existence of Israel, and I would have thought it important to add that this question was not answered.

Again at the bottom of page 8, a reference is made to the official dinner which we attended with the entire Syrian Government headed by the Prime Minister, and here too I would have thought that it should be said that, contrary to the usual practice in most countries, no speeches of any kind were made at this dinner, although, of course, this may be an Arab custom of which I am unaware.

At the bottom of page 9 and on page 10 there is a report on our meeting with President Assad and this gives the impression that it was a question and answer session between the President and Chancellor Kreisky. You will recollect that I questioned the President very closely about the refugee camp that we had visited and specifically asked why the Syrian people had been put in a camp in bad conditions, located outside Damascus, when one would have thought that they would have been assimilated into the population proper. The President replied that these people were farmers and would not settle down to city life. I then said that the land around the refugee camp appeared to be fertile and why were they not working it rather than waiting for manyana. You will recollect that there was no reply to this question.

You will also recall that I asked the President about the allegations by the Israelis that Syrian troops, when located on the Golan Heights, were firing down into the valley on Israeli settlers. The President replied that this was propaganda. I then reminded the President that, having visited the valleys in 1966 I had seen Syrian gun emplacements at the top of the Golan Heights and some of the damage caused in the valleys below. You will remember that there was no answer to this.

With reference to the section dealing with security - under the heading 'Israel' at the bottom of page 10 - I was not aware that the Israelis had a large number of heavily armed men accompanying us throughout our visit. Certainly there were outriders when we moved from the Airport, but I took this to be a courtesy to Chancellor Kreisky, and it is the usual courtesy accorded to a Head of State visiting another country. Also, there was close security when we went around to see some of the historic buildings, etc., but, for the remainder of the Israeli visit, I could only see the usual plain-clothes policemen that are on duty in every country when a Head of State makes a visit. Indeed, I went with Israel Gat and three Israelis, who were the fathers of Israeli prisoners of war in Syrian hands, to the Golan Heights and there was no escort.

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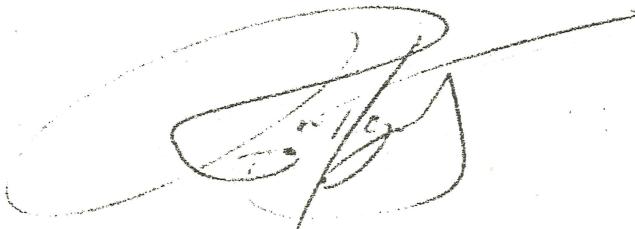
On page 12 there is a report on the delegation's visit to the Opposition Party, Likud. You will recall that half way through the Chancellor's report to this organisation, I suggested quietly to the delegation that we were in the country to report to the Israeli Government, which we had done, and not to waste our time reporting to the Opposition which did not support the Government. This was accepted by the delegation and at this point we left.

At the bottom of page 12 there is a report on our dinner at the Kibbutz of Yigal Allon, which was attended by Palestinian officials. It was also attended by three Palestinian workers. These were ordinary people who sat at my table. It was my direct questioning of the Mayors of Hebron and Bethlehem which brought the answer from them that they would like to get rid of the regime of occupation. To my further questioning they stated that they did not necessarily regard Yassir Arafat as the leader of their people.

With regard to the report on our visit to Dayan - page 13 - you will recall that his statement that he was prepared to double the number of refugees returning to the Golan Heights from 20,000 to 40,000 was made in answer to a direct question from myself.

These may appear to you to be somewhat trivial comments but if we are going to get the record straight then the report ought not to give the impression that the delegation was a one-man band. You well know that the majority of the members of the Mission took an active and articulate part.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tony Benn".