

Rabin's legacy

Mark Dreyfus

Yitzhak Rabin was one of Israel's greatest prime ministers. But not only that, Rabin's courage and integrity in that role makes him stand out as one of the great global leaders of the past generation.

In today's world in particular, Rabin's legacy of leadership is clear. During his time as prime minister, Rabin provided a compelling example of what national leadership looks like when the role is embraced by a person of courage, integrity and a commitment to face the unvarnished truth of the challenges before them. In all these matters, Rabin demonstrated a leadership that is the polar opposite of the woeful example provided by the populist rulers of so many nations today.

As a member of the Australian Labor Party, I have always felt an affinity with the political and trade union wings of the labour movement in Israel, which have been integral to Israel's foundation and later successes as a state. The Israeli Labour Party's past leaders include not only Rabin, but also Prime Ministers Golda Meir, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak.

Rabin knew what it was to fight for his country. As a young man, he fought for the Palmach in the years leading up to the establishment of modern Israel. And then he fought on as a member of the Israel Defence Force, rapidly rising through the ranks until finally serving as IDF chief-of-staff during Israel's greatest military victory—the 1967 war.

Yet, the same man who helped Israel take the occupied territories also understood that they would need to be relinquished in the interests of peace. In 1993, in the context of the Oslo peace process, Rabin had the courage to tell his former enemies in the PLO, as well as the nation that elected him to lead them:

We, the soldiers who have returned from battle stained with blood, we who have seen our relatives and friends killed before our eyes, we who have attended their funerals and cannot look into the eyes of their parents, we who have come from a land where parents bury their children, we who have fought against you, the Palestinians, we say to you today in a loud and clear voice: Enough of blood and tears. Enough.

Rabin's leadership, as a courageous soldier for both war and then for peace, was recognised around the world. His role as a peacemaker was acknowledged with the Nobel Peace Prize, which he was awarded in 1994. It also formed the foundation of the deep friendship he forged with US President Bill Clinton, as they took the bold actions they understood would be necessary if Israel and the Palestinians were to bring an end to their long history of blood and tears.

We cannot know what Israel would look like today if Rabin had lived on to lead his country toward peace. As so many of us still remember hearing the news of 25 years ago, Rabin's leadership was ended, not by the democratic choice of the people of Israel, but by murder. Israel's prime minister, a man who had fought for his nation for his entire adult life, was not cut down by the bullets of his enemies on the battlefield, or by a Palestinian terrorist's bomb. Rather, he was murdered by a right-wing Jewish extremist, driven by radical religious doctrines that placed mystical territorial aspirations above respect for life, above the opportunities of peace, and above the Zionist vision of a democratic and independent State of Israel.

Rabin's legacy seems even clearer today than it did at the time of his murder. One of his great strengths was his willingness to face the truth of the world, and of the challenges it posed for Israel. It wasn't that he didn't want a larger Israel incorporating all the lands mentioned in the Torah. Rabin had the courage to face the reality that another nation, the Palestinians, held a yearning for those same lands, and not only that, that justice required their claim to be accommodated. To tell his nation that painful compromise was necessary, including the Israeli settlers whose ties to those territories were both genuine and deep, required true courage. It required a willingness to lead, rather than follow.

Today, we see far too many leaders in the world who spend their time listening to the versions of reality presented by their spin doctors and by vested interests looking to further their profits, rather than by the experts trying to present the plain truth of the challenges we face. Too many leaders seem interested primarily in what they see as the game of politics, and spend their time working with their political strategists and focus groups on the best way to maintain their hold on power, rather than the best way to serve the national—and, I would hope, in our increasingly interconnected world—the global interest.

To lead a nation is an immensely difficult task. It requires the courage to truly lead. It requires the integrity to face the reality of the world as it is, rather than as one wishes it to be, and to do what needs to be done in response. Leadership also requires compassion, and the humility to admit mistakes, and to boldly set out in a new direction if that is what the national interest demands.

Yitzhak Rabin demonstrated all of these qualities of leadership. It is my hope that Rabin's legacy will continue to inspire current and future leaders around the world to also embrace those qualities, and the example of courageous leadership with which he provides us.