

A forthright Joe Clark in Jerusalem

External Affairs Minister Joe Clark may not have conquered the Middle East. But he placed squarely on record Canada's balanced policy towards all countries and peoples in an area where Canadians have traditionally tried to keep the peace as well as promote it.

Though the timing of Clark's visit to Israel turned out to be unfortunate, that wasn't his fault. As Israel's national unity government patched itself up, Clark chose that moment to reaffirm Canada's support for "a Palestinian homeland" on the West Bank and Gaza.

The occasion was Israeli Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir's official dinner for him. Clark must have known that his host didn't agree with him, but he went ahead anyway. As he explained later, he went the extra length to make the point specifically and on the record in Jerusalem.

He also praised a recent statement by Prime Minister Shimon Peres that recognized the Palestinians "as a people." Shamir later joined the issue by telling reporters that the Palestinians were not a separate people but part of the Jordanian nation.

He added, "I see the Jordanian-Palestinian people as a united people. They have their country, they have a state that belongs to

them." The West Bank and Gaza are not part of their homeland. "These regions belong to another country. These regions are under our control."

The split between Peres and Shamir on this fundamental issue is well known. Yet Clark waded right in knowing that this was his last chance while still in Israel to make Canada's position clear.

Sooner or later Peres and Shamir will have to close ranks on the Palestinian problem — or break them. Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organization face the same choice.

Clark was right to express Canada's long-standing concern about the fate of the Palestinian people. Of course he balanced it by stressing Canadian support for an Israel within "secure and recognized borders." That's the least he could have said on what is surely the cornerstone of Canada's Middle East policy.

Clark didn't change anything in his first trip to the region as external affairs minister. He wasn't supposed to. But if he placed Canada a little more on the Middle East peace map as an unbiased country, his visit was fully justified. Such trips should become a regular feature of his future travels.
