

CREATING A CLOSED ZONE IN CANADA*



*Yani Goodman, The Closed Zone, animation on the siege of Gaza, www.closedzone.com

THE CANADIAN PARLIAMENTARY COALITION TO COMBAT ANTISEMITISM AND THE THREAT TO FREE SPEECH ON THE MIDDLE EAST

Israel's siege of Gaza has made it a "closed zone" – no access, no exit, cut off from the world. By attempting to shut down criticism of Israel's practices, Canadian supporters of the government of Israel are creating another "closed zone" in Canada – in which criticism, open debate, and freedom of expression will not be allowed.

Who is doing this? Quietly, without authority from Parliament, an all-party group which calls itself the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Antisemitism (CPCCA) has been formed to investigate antisemitism in Canada. Not antisemitism as it is traditionally understood: discrimination against or denial of the right of Jews to live as equal members of society. (Members of this Coalition are well aware that traditional antisemitism exists only among fringe groups in Canada.) Instead, their focus is on something they label as the "new antisemitism" -- which they define as criticism of the State of Israel!

WHAT IS THE CANADIAN PARLIAMENTARY COALITION TO COMBAT ANTISEMITISM?

Whenever criticism of Israel increases, as it did in the wake of Israel's 2006 attack on Lebanon and after the 2009 Gaza massacre, organizations supporting the State of Israel insist that this is a symptom of a "new antisemitism". This argument is designed to deflect attention from Israel's real crimes by smearing those who criticise Israel.

The CPCCA, which is integral to the effort to protect Israel from criticism, was formed in March, 2009. It is comprised of twenty-two Parliamentarians, including members of all four parties in the House of Commons. Jason Kenney, the Harper government's Minister of Citizen, Immigration and Multi-Culturalism and the Conservative government's point person on Israel, and Irwin Cotler, former Liberal Justice Minister and long time supporter of Israel, are ex-officio members. (For a full list of committee members and more details on this committee go to www.cpcca.ca)

WHAT IS THE CPCCA UP TO?

The CPCCA was publicly launched on June 2, 2009 with a call for written submissions "to consider evidence on the nature of antisemitism....and consider further measures that might be usefully introduced". It received more than 150 submissions. Contrary to commitments made by CPCCA's executive director Monica Kugelnass, however, most of these submissions have not been posted on its website. Nor has the CPCCA fulfilled its commitment to reveal the source of its funding.

SERIOUSLY FREE SPEECH

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WHAT IS THE CPCCA UP TO?

The CPCCA began public hearings in Ottawa on Nov. 2, 2009. Almost without exception, none of the many organizations that submitted briefs critical of the CPCCA's mandate or which criticized the notion of a "new antisemitism" were invited to make presentations to the inquiry panel. Meanwhile, representatives of organizations which did not submit briefs, including university presidents and representatives of police departments, were called as witnesses. Clearly the CPCCA anticipated that these submissions would support their preordained conclusion that the new antisemitism was a large and growing problem in urgent need of legislative response.

The CPCCA will issue a report at the conclusion of these hearings and "anticipates that the Government will respond to this report no later than the fall of 2010". The Coalition's stated objective is to include criticism of Israel in an expanded version of existing Hate Crimes legislation. In addition, consideration is being given to doing something similar with respect to Canadian Human Rights legislation. Canada, viewed by Israel as one of its strongest supporters, could then provide a model for similar legislative undertakings in other countries.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The essence of the "new antisemitism" campaign is an attempt to conflate discrimination against Jews - something which is as illegitimate as any other form of racism and discrimination and must be opposed - with criticism of the State of Israel, its actions, or its governing ideology, Zionism. It is the view of CPCCA ex-officio member Irwin Cotler, Israel is "the collective Jew among nations." From this perspective, criticizing Israel is the same as discriminating against Jews.

At a time when racism and bigotry against many communities in Canada -- First Nations, Muslims, South Asians and Chinese, Haitians among them -- constitute a much greater problem than antisemitism, it is not clear why the Coalition has chosen to focus its attention solely on the latter.

The CPCCA accepts some criticism of Israel may be legitimate. But it also declares that criticism of Israel as a Jewish State - rather than a state where all citizens enjoy equal rights - is inherently antisemitic. That calling Israel's treatment of its Palestinian citizens apartheid is antisemitic. And that supporting the growing international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign by those determined to change Israel's behaviour is antisemitic.

Ironically if this expanded definition of antisemitism becomes legislation, it will be possible to criticize the actions of the Canadian government but not those of the government of Israel. Just the fear of being prosecuted is likely to create a "chill" on both university campuses and in the media. But why should Israel be the one country in the world we are not allowed to criticize?

Moreover, branding those who criticize Israel as "antisemitic" is part of a campaign to help organizations such as the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) and B'nai Brith -- which provide uncritical support for Israel -- put themselves forward as the only legitimate representatives of Canadian Jews. While there are many Jewish organizations and individuals, both within Israel and throughout the world, whose views on Israel differ dramatically from those of the CJC and B'nai Brith, the CPCCA is not interested in hearing from those voices.

The SFSC insists that criticizing Israel is not antisemitic and that restricting debate on the illegal occupation of Gaza and the apartheid nature of Israel society will only allow the continued oppression of the Palestinian people and make a mockery of political free expression in Canada. If we keep silent about the CPCCA, even a document like the one you are reading may ultimately be considered illegal.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- **Become informed.** Go to seriouslyfreespeech.wordpress.com/cpcca/ to learn more about the CPCCA and read submissions by the Seriously Free Speech Committee and other organizations.
- **Send us your email address** at info@seriouslyfreespeech.ca and be kept up-to-date.
- **Contact your MP** and tell them you are opposed to their parties participating in the CPCCA.
- **Help us spread the word about the CPCCA.** Invite us at info@seriouslyfreespeech.ca to speak to your union, community group or church.