

August 14, 2009

Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Antisemitism
Room 440-C, Centre Block
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON, K1A0A6

Dear Parliamentarians,

I am a South African-born Canadian Jew whose family moved to Montreal in 1964, when I was four years old, to escape the discrimination and racism of apartheid. I am currently adjunct faculty at the University of Toronto, where I teach diaspora studies with the Historical Studies Department and the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies. I am also managing editor of *International Journal*, the internationally respected scholarly quarterly of the Canadian International Council. I hold a master's in international politics from the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC, and a PhD in international politics from Aberystwyth University in the UK. I am also the author of *Muslims in the Diaspora: The Somali Communities of London and Toronto* and numerous articles exploring the dynamics between diasporic communities and the wider societies around them and the political culture of integration. Finally, and because it is also relevant, I lived in Israel/Palestine for three years, from 1982-1985, after I finished my bachelor of journalism and political science at Carleton University.

The questions of anti-Semitism and racism are ones I have thought long and hard about and the coalition is right that combating racism and anti-Semitism, and understanding them, is critical to Canada's ability to work towards the creation of a socially just diverse society.

I have been deeply touched by racism and anti-Semitism. Although most Jews were considered "white" in South Africa's colour-coded social system, race-consciousness is never friendly to Jews, and my family was consistently discriminated against, to the point that my grandfather shortened the family name from "Bernstein" to "Berns." In Montreal, as a child, school-mates would refuse to hold hands with me in class. Coming from Africa, I was regarded by many of my Anglo Scots-Irish classmates as a "black Jew," tolerated somewhat coldly by their parents in a kind of patronizing Christian missionary spirit. At one point, when I was in high school, I was asked point-blank where my horns were; my friend had been informed at her Catholic elementary school that all Jews had them growing out of their foreheads. I know what anti-Semitism and racism are and how very much they wound.

At the same time, I think it is important to understand what anti-Semitism is not.

I am one of a growing number of Jews who is increasingly distressed by Israel's treatment of Palestinians, both within the state and in the occupied territories. I am distressed about it because it is plain and simply wrong; I am distressed about it because at its core Judaism as I have always understood it is about not doing unto others what you would not want to have done to you, and so it has seemed profoundly unJudaic; and I am distressed about it because it cannot possibly lead to a peaceful co-existence between Israel and its neighbours.

I think it is important to recognize that criticism of Israel, whether by the growing number of diasporic Jews (dissent within Israel and criticism of the state for its policies towards Palestinians is, and has long been, much more vocal than criticism of it from outside) or by non-Jews, is *not* anti-Semitism.

As with criticism of any kind, framing is critical. Criticism of Israel's policies, or calling Israel an apartheid state, is not in itself anti-Semitic. (There are certainly elements of Israel/Palestine – the most obvious being the wall, but, to my mind, the most pernicious being the significantly different amounts of state spending that go towards Jewish versus Palestinian schools inside Israel – that bring apartheid South Africa to mind, even though Arabs and Jews are essentially the same peoples, divided by politics but not by “race,” and it seems nonsensical to think of them divided on racial terms.)

Nor is it anti-Semitic to suggest that the answer lies perhaps in a one-state solution in which Jews and Palestinians live peacefully but which is neither a particularly Jewish nor particularly Palestinian state, *per se*. (Isn't that the kind of state we are building in this country, after all?)

What is anti-Semitic is to suggest that Israel's problematic actions and policies exist because there is something inherently evil in Jews or Judaism. This is a very, very important distinction, and one that the coalition needs to think carefully about.

I am very concerned that in their desire to protect Israel, spokespersons for some of the major Jewish organizations mistake legitimate criticism of Israel for anti-Semitic disparaging of Jews and Judaism. I am also concerned that this very mischaracterization of criticism of Israel *in itself* provokes anti-Semitism.

It is vital to fight anti-Semitism. It is equally vital not to mischaracterize legitimate criticism of Israel – however much one disagrees with it – as anti-Semitism: sadly, one of the effects of mischaracterizing criticism of Israel is, ironically, increased anti-Semitism.

We need to be able to work towards socially just societies world-over. If we don't, Canada will be pressured to absorb increasing numbers of embittered refugees. We need also to recognize that this is a country whose diverse citizens are connected in one way or another with almost every other country on the planet (which is what it means to be diasporic), so that we as Canadians need to be able to have thoughtful, critical discussions about conflicts

worldwide. We need to learn to have them respectfully and civilly, and without unduly accusing each other of racism, which – tragically – forecloses the kind of useful, solution-seeking discussion we could be capable of having.

Please let me know if I can be of further help in any way.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rima Berns-McGown". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rima Berns-McGown, PhD
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