

THE CPCCA: A THREAT TO FREE SPEECH IN CANADA

Are you aware that a serious threat to free speech is unfolding in Ottawa despite the free speech guarantees in Article 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms? This could set a dangerous precedent for other important issues.

Did you know a self-selected committee of Canadian parliamentarians has been quietly holding meetings that could lead to the criminalization of certain political expression in this country? This committee calls itself the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Antisemitism (CPCCA).

The CPCCA website (www.cpcca.ca), without providing evidence, states that “The extent and severity of antisemitism is widely regarded as at its worst level since the end of the Second World War.” However, it is clear that this committee’s primary interest is not antisemitism as it is traditionally understood, i.e., discrimination against or denial of the right of Jews to live as equal members of society. Instead, the Coalition’s focus is on something it calls “the new antisemitism,” which is defined as improper or excessive criticism of the State of Israel.

The CPCCA was initially comprised of 22 Parliamentarians, including members from all four parties in the House of Commons. However, the Bloc Québécois members recently resigned from the Coalition, stating that they have come to see it as biased. Jason Kenney (the Harper government’s Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multi-Culturalism) and Irwin Cotler (former Liberal Justice Minister) are leading members of the CPCCA.

WHAT IS THE CPCCA UP TO?

While the Canadian House of Commons regularly sets up parliamentary committees to study particular subjects and make recommendations back to Parliament, the CPCCA – despite its name – is not a government body, and has been given no authority from Parliament as a whole. The CPCCA was publicly launched in early June of last year with a call for written submissions “to consider evidence on the nature of antisemitism....and consider further measures that might be usefully introduced.” It subsequently received more than 150 written submissions. Contrary to commitments made by the CPCCA’s executive director, most of these submissions have not been posted on its website.

The CPCCA began a series of public hearings in Ottawa in early November. Almost without exception, briefs which rejected the CPCCA’s mandate or criticized the notion of a “new antisemitism” were not invited to speak to the inquiry panel. Meanwhile, representatives of organizations that did not submit briefs – including university presidents and representatives of police departments – were actively solicited to speak. One of the first witnesses to be called was Irwin Cotler, while Jason Kenney was one of the last.

The hearings are now finished, and the CPCCA will soon submit its report to the Government, which it “anticipates will respond no later than the fall of 2010”. The Coalition’s objective has been clear from the outset: to restrict growing criticism in Canada of Israel’s policies. This might include an expanded version of existing Hate Crimes legislation or possibly changes to Canadian Human Rights legislation.

SERIOUSLY FREE SPEECH

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

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 troubling that this Coalition has chosen to focus its attention solely on the latter.

The campaign against the “new antisemitism” is clearly an attempt to conflate discrimination against Jews – something which is as illegitimate as every other form of prejudice or discrimination and therefore must be opposed – with what members of the Coalition deem to be excessive or unwarranted criticism of the State of Israel, its actions, or its governing ideology, Zionism. CPCCA ex-officio member Irwin Cotler has stated that, in his view, Israel is “the collective Jew among nations.” From this perspective, criticizing fundamental aspects of Israeli society or actions is essentially the same as discriminating against Jews.

The CPCCA formally acknowledges that some criticism of Israel may be legitimate. But it insists that any criticism of Israel as an exclusively Jewish state automatically constitutes antisemitism. Hence, the CPCCA deems the use of the term “apartheid” to describe Israel’s treatment of its Palestinian citizens, as well as support for the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign that is designed to pressure Israel to change its behaviour, to be antisemitic.

If the expanded definition of antisemitism that is being advocated by the CPCCA becomes legislation, it will then be possible to publicly criticize the actions of the Canadian government but not those of the government of Israel. This makes no sense. Moreover, just the possibility of being prosecuted will likely create a fear of speaking out against Israeli policies on university campuses and in the media. This seems to be the main goal of the CPCCA.

Criticism of a state and its policies is not the same as hatred of its people. Thus criticism of the State of Israel and its policies is not a form of antisemitism.

The members of the Seriously Free Speech Committee hold no common position on the issues or solutions in the Israel/Palestine conflict. Rather we advocate for freedom of expression on this important topic. Restricting debate on subjects of such international importance makes a mockery of freedom of expression in Canada. If we keep silent about the CPCCA, even a document like the one you are now reading may soon be deemed 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.

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