



Combating Anti-Semitism or Shielding Israel?

Submission to the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Antisemitism

Joanne Naiman

I am writing this submission as a sociologist, a Jew, and a long-time opponent of all forms of oppression. As a person of Jewish descent, I obviously have a personal interest in seeing anti-Semitism addressed wherever it appears. However, as a social scientist I feel the term is currently being used without much precision.

You describe your mission as an attempt to “[confront and combat the global resurgence of Antisemitism](#)” and note that “Antisemitism is widely regarded as at its worst level since the end of the Second World War.” These are certainly strong statements, and, if true, require serious action. However, other than noting that students on certain campuses in Canada are “ridiculed and intimidated,” you provide no other concrete examples. (I will deal with the issue of criticism of Israel at a later point.)

Anti-Semitism can be defined as hostility directed at those of Jewish origin. Like all forms of hostility to ethno-racial groups, anti-Semitism consists of both prejudice, that is, an attitude of dislike or hostility toward people of Jewish background, as well as discrimination, which is the denial of equal treatment or opportunities to these individuals. While these two phenomena are usually connected, they can be distinguished from each other. Prejudice is distasteful and can occasionally lead to hurtful acts – including those of a violent nature. However, discrimination is generally the more serious of the two processes since it will inevitably hurt the victim’s life chances, such as getting a job or finding a place to live.

There is ample evidence to show that in Canada Jews as a group do not regularly face discrimination; in fact, they are one of Canada’s most advantaged minority groups. When examining any of the traditional variables utilized to assess socioeconomic status – such as occupation, education, and income – Jews continually come out at or near the top when compared to other ethno-racial groups. In *The Encyclopedia of Canada’s Peoples* (1999), Morton Weinfeld notes that “by any criterion, Jews have been successful.” According to Weinfeld, Jews in Canada have low rates of unemployment, have a high number of individuals in “desirable” occupations, have high levels of educational attainment, and “can be numbered among the wealthiest Canadians.” More recently, neither Ornstein (2006) nor Galabuzi (2006) considered Jews to be a disadvantaged group relative to others.

Moreover, the economic and social advantages that have accrued in general to the Jewish community in Canada have also been reflected in what social scientists refer to as an accumulation of social capital. Put simply, those with economic and social advantage are generally able to make important economic and political connections, i.e. to “network” with those who have influence, including those in the media. While one must tread lightly on this reality – given the anti-Semitic stereotypes often expressed about Jews and their excess of power – it would be inaccurate to assume that the Jewish population in Canada has no advantage in this area.



Hate Crimes

But what about prejudice? Certainly most Jews in Canada can tell you of vile slurs, stereotypes, or biased comments that they have received or heard. More serious are hate crimes. According to Statistics Canada (June 2004), there were 928 hate crime incidents in 2001-2002, with Jewish people or their institutions the most likely target, at 25% of all crimes. However, by 2007 Statistics Canada noted (May 2009) that police-reported hate crime overall had dropped, and that Blacks were targeted most often (33%). There were 185 religiously-motivated incidents in 2007, down from 220 in 2006, with two-thirds of these against Jews. While such slurs and hate crimes are certainly disturbing, they can hardly be seen as a wave of anti-Semitism. Indeed, the majority of hate crimes are listed as being mischief offences, such as graffiti on public property.

To sum up then, the data indicate that the Jewish population of Canada is, overall, socioeconomically advantaged, and that the number of hate crimes against Jews has been dropping. What, then, is the “problem of anti-Semitism” that your committee is asking governments to address? The reality is that what is repeatedly being referred to as “new anti-Semitism” is actually an escalating critique of the policies of the State of Israel (Klug, 2004).

For example, there have indeed been tensions on many university campuses in recent years. However, these cannot be accurately seen as being rooted in anti-Semitism. Rather, tensions have arisen between Zionists and those who support the Palestinian cause, and Jewish students and faculty can often be found in the latter group. Resolving these tensions requires that university administrators encourage civil debates, and show fairness to differing opinions. Unfortunately, the repeated cries of “anti-Semitism” from Zionists have put university administrators in awkward positions. On some campuses (such as Carleton and York) their rash overreaction and uncritical responses not only showed bias but actually aggravated tensions.

How do we explain the strong attachment of Jews to Israel, given that most Jews are not immigrants from that country? In Canada as around the world, since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, to be Jewish has meant being inextricably linked to the State of Israel. From the outset, Israel declared itself to be a “Jewish state,” and its flag has as its centerpiece the Star of David, the symbol of the Jewish religion. Many Jews have relatives living in Israel, and have visited there many times. When I attended Hebrew School, we studied modern Hebrew, the history and geography of Israel, and sang “Hatikvah,” the Israeli national anthem. Like most Jews, I was told that Israel was the guarantee that we would never experience another Holocaust.

The strong defense of the State of Israel by the Jewish community can be understood as part of what is referred to by sociologists as ethnocentrism. American author Joel Charon (2007,159) writes:

“As we interact and become part of a society or group, we generally come to feel something good about belonging to that group...Becoming part of a group encourages a sense of loyalty, and that loyalty encourages ethnocentrism. Loyalty means a commitment to something we regard as important and right. It brings a feeling of obligation to serve and defend. Criticism and threats to the group are defended against.”

Thus, if Jews see support for the State of Israel as an essential part of being Jewish – and the only thing between them and another Holocaust – then any criticism of that State or its policies



will be seen, *de facto*, as an attack on Jews as a group. In the face of growing global opposition to current Israeli government policies, well-meaning Jews – who simply cannot accept that their people would do anything immoral – have turned to both blaming the victim (“the Palestinians started it”) and blaming those who support the victim (they’re anti-Semites or “self-hating Jews”). Thus, it is not surprising that as the criticism of Israeli government policies has increased worldwide, so have cries of the growth of a global resurgence of anti-Semitism.

The London Declaration states that “calls for the destruction of the State of Israel are inherently anti-Semitic.” Is a call for the end of a theocracy and the creation of a fully democratic Israeli state, where all citizens – of whatever religion or background – are treated equally and humanely then anti-Semitic? This may seem like an absurd possibility, but for most Jews this is indeed the case. Allowing equality of rights and freedoms to all its citizens, regardless of religion, would diminish the “Jewishness” of the State of Israel, and therefore it is *de facto* anti-Semitism.

This leaves those who are critical of current Israeli policies in an impossible situation. If people criticize the policies of the Islamic State of Iran, or they call for human rights and equality for all its citizens, are they anti-Islamic? Was opposition to the Apartheid regime of South Africa anti-White? The ever-increasing cries of anti-Semitism are a way of deflecting attention from real horrors – the daily humiliations, evictions, land expropriation, mass imprisonment and killings – currently being inflicted on the Palestinian people by Israel. In one of the true ironies of history, we now find Jews around the world – who swore after the Holocaust that they would never again be victims – claiming that they are the real victims in the Middle East and around the world. Indeed, some argue (Israeli author Avraham Burg, 2008, for example) that the perpetual need of Jews to see their victimization as unique is the key to understanding both the cries of “a new anti-Semitism” and an unwillingness to empathize with the ongoing plight of the Palestinians.

The CPCCA was created to examine a social phenomenon that, while odious, is certainly far from being a major social problem in Canada. Compare it to, for example, the many thousands of homeless people roaming our streets; the native communities in the North with inadequate housing and water; the escalating suicide rates of Native youth; the large numbers of farmers and fishers who can no longer make a living; and the real and persistent racism faced by many in Canada. While the CPCCA is not affiliated to the government, many Canadians will be asking – and rightly so – why at this time a committee of parliamentarians was created to deal with what is a minor social problem in this country. The only answer can be that the Jewish community has greater political influence than, say, Indigenous people, the poor, or racial minorities.

Shielding Israel

My worry, then, is that however well-meaning the intent of this committee, it is almost certain to unintentionally fan the flames of anti-Semitism, convincing those already disposed to believe it that Jews hold undue sway in the political arena and have too much power. This possibility is enhanced by the failure of this Coalition to publicly reveal its funding sources, particularly since an “Inter-Parliamentary Coalition” gives the impression that you are a publicly-funded government entity. Moreover, to say on your website that the only funding accepted is that which doesn’t [“compromise the terms of reference and the mandate of the CPCCA”](#) is, at minimum, naïve.



The Bulletin

Socialist Project • E-Bulletin No. 270
November 5, 2009



Your committee wants to develop meaningful suggestions to combat anti-Semitism. I have tried to argue that what the Jewish community refers to as anti-Semitism is almost always either a critique of the abhorrent and illegal policies of the State of Israel, or is a prejudice against Jews that has arisen from opposition to the policies of the only country in the world that considers itself a Jewish state. The global criticism of South Africa ended when Apartheid ended. Thus, in its final report the CPCCA could do no better than to advocate for major changes to current Israeli government policies. Minimally Israel must dismantle the [Apartheid wall](#), end the dual system of law in the occupied West Bank that favours Jewish settlers, and end its collective punishment of 1.5 million Gazans (a violation of [Article 43](#) of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and a gross violation of international humanitarian law). A failure to implicate current Israeli policy in any possible growth of anti-Semitism worldwide will certainly convince many that the CPCCA was biased from the outset. •

Joanne Naiman is a retired sociology professor living in Vancouver.

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