

Web Exclusive: The Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism

What it means for Canadians

JOANNE NAIMAN | February 4th 2010

- *The following is a transcript of a talk given on January 30, 2010 at "One Year Later: Gaza Remembered," at the Vancouver Public Library.*

We are here tonight primarily to hear about the effects of an illegal occupation and war on the people of Gaza, and to express our solidarity with the Palestinian people. In the anti-apartheid movement, a popular slogan was the old Wobbly saying "An injury to one is an injury to all." What I hope to show you tonight is that, indeed, the "injuries" affecting people half way around the world are about to have serious consequences for us all.

Specifically, I'm going to talk about the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Antisemitism (CPCCA), which has been meeting in Ottawa since last fall, and is now meeting through February. "What Coalition?" you may be asking yourselves. Exactly this entity has been almost totally out of the public eye since its inception. While many Canadians have expressed dismay about the recent prorogation of Parliament, few are aware of a committee whose main aim is, to quote one critic, "an attempt to curtail freedom of speech and academic freedom across Canada, and to possibly criminalize certain kinds of human rights discourse."

What, exactly, is the CPCCA? The Canadian House of Commons regularly sets up parliamentary committees to study particular subjects and make recommendations back to parliament. In the case of the CPCCA, however, this procedure was totally circumvented, and despite its name, this entity has *no* authority from parliament as a whole, despite being made up of 22 MPs from all four parties currently sitting in the House of Commons. The two key players in setting up the CPCCA (and who are ex-officio members of its Steering Committee) are Irwin Cotler, a lawyer, past president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, and former Liberal Justice Minister and Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration & Multiculturalism.

In March of 2009, Kenney, who has been described by Murray Dobbin as "point man for Stephen Harper on issues involving Israel," banned British MP George Galloway from entering Canada, almost certainly because he'd just led a humanitarian relief convoy to Gaza. He also recently reallocated funding away from the United Nations Relief Agency (UNWRA) because of its assistance to Palestinian refugees. At a recent conference in Jerusalem, Kenney boasted of his government's "zero tolerance approach to antisemitism." As examples of this he noted the following actions taken by his government: 1) the elimination of funding to the Canadian Arab Federation (whose leadership he described as anti-Semitic and apologists for terrorism); 2) ending contact with "like minded organizations" [to the Canadian Arab Federation] such as the Canadian Islamic Congress; and 3) the de-funding of KAIROS, a church-led NGO agency, which Kenney (incorrectly) described as "taking a leadership role in the [Israeli] boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign." To further quote Kenney, "The existential threat faced by Israel on a daily basis is ultimately a threat to the broader Western civilization." In other words, Kenney endorses an "us" vs "them" view of the world, a "clash of civilizations" that pits the Christian "west" against the Moslem "east."

The other half of this duo, Irwin Cotler, is considered an expert on [international law](#) and [human rights law](#). He has served on the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and its sub-Committee on Human Rights and International Development, as well as on the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights. In 2000, he was appointed special advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the International Criminal Court. However, despite this background, he has a long record of supporting Israel's violations of Palestinian human rights and breaches of international law. Cotler strongly opposed the Goldstone report, and concluded, "if there had been no Hamas war crimes, there would have been no need for an Israeli response." Cotler's wife, Ariela, is a native of [Jerusalem](#) and has a longstanding connection to the right-wing [Likud](#) party in Israel, and two daughters have been in the Israeli military. Cotler's views on antisemitism are clear: "Compared to most previous anti-Jewish outbreaks, this [new antisemitism] Šattacks primarily the collective Jews, the State of Israel. ŠIn the past, the most dangerous anti-Semites were those who wanted to make the world *Judenrein*, 'free of Jews'. Today, the most dangerous anti-Semites might be those who want to make the world * *Judenstaatrein**, 'free of a Jewish state'."

The CPCCA emerged from the experience of a delegation of eleven MPs, led by Kenny and Cotler, at the London Conference to Combat Antisemitism in Feb 2009. The London Conference was itself an off-shoot of the Inter-Parliamentary Committee for Combating Antisemitism (ICCA). Working backward, the ICCA was originally co-founded in 2002 by none other than Irwin Cotler, with Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Rabbi Michael Melchior and former Deputy prime Minister of Sweden Per Ahlmark. However, this committee apparently was thought to be too closely tied to the State of Israel to be effective, and didn't move forward. Its second incarnation, now distanced from direct Israeli involvement, met in London in February 2009, with funding from the UK government and a British charitable organization. The underlying assumption and key premise of the CPCCA, even prior to hearing any witnesses (in line with both the ICCA & the London Conference), is clear from its website: that we are witnessing an expansion of antisemitism both in Canada and internationally, and its form is being referred to as the "new antisemitism." All three of these groups express an urgent need to combat this new antisemitism, especially in the media and in academia.

Is antisemitism in fact growing in Canada? I am a sociologist, and in the submission I made to the CPCCA in the summer of 2009, I made clear that all the traditional data used to assess the level of prejudice and discrimination towards groups, such as income, discrimination in hiring & housing, educational level, hate crimes etc., do not indicate that this is the case. Does antisemitism in all its odious forms exist in Canada? Certainly. Is it expanding and intensifying? No. Nonetheless, and without any supportive evidence, the CPCCA website states that "the extent & severity of antisemitism is widely regarded as at its worst level since the end of the second World War" and "recorded incidents of antisemitism have been on the rise both locally and globally."

The CPCCA claims independence from the government of Canada, NGOs, and Jewish community organizations, and that it "will voluntarily disclose all sources of funding." However, no one to date has been able to get any information on their funding sources. And this is no small organization: listed on the website are seventy individuals who have been or will be brought to Ottawa to appear as "witnesses" at their inquiry. The CPCCA received around 150 written submissions last summer. The hearings have largely been attempts to confirm the positions the CPCCA had from the outset. Many submissions disputed the CPCCA's premises of a "new antisemitism," and pointed out both the deficiencies and the dangers of such an argument.

This hasn't stopped Panel Chair Mario Silva from saying "The breadth and depth of experience these witnesses have will do a lot to augment our understanding of the present situation and will thoroughly inform our coming recommendations." To give you a true sense of the Kafkaesque nature of this committee, one of the first speakers to be called was Irwin Cotler, while Jason Kenney is one of the last. Clearly, this Coalition knew where it was headed from the day it sent out its first call for submissions. The rest has been pure window dressing.

It's not hard to see that if one accepts Cotler's premise that Israel is what he calls "the collective Jew," then any criticism of the State of Israel is, *de facto*, anti-Semitic. There can be little doubt, therefore, that this Coalition will soon be putting forward recommendations to the government that certain criticisms of the State of Israel within Canadian universities and in the media should be defined as a form of antisemitism, and therefore an incitement to hatred. Thus, in the strange Alice-in-Wonderland world we're now in, those who stand up and charge Israel (correctly) with gross violations of both the Geneva Conventions and of international humanitarian law may soon find themselves charged under section 319 of the Canadian Criminal Code and section 13(1) of the Canadian Human Rights Act, or else silenced by judicial warrants of seizure issued under section 320 of the Criminal Code. We can assume that this would include calls for Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions, as well as using the term "apartheid" to describe the actions of the Israeli state.

Given Jason Kenney's recent comments in Israel, it is clear that the CPCCA anticipates a very attentive and rapid response from the Canadian government. In his Dec 16 speech in Jerusalem mentioned earlier, he noted the presence in the audience of Irwin Cotler, as well as Scott Reid and Mario Silva, the Co-Chairs of the CPCCA, and concluded by saying "that we can offer some useful reference points and best practices to share with the rest of the world and parliamentarians who share our concern about the new antisemitism." Put plainly, the CPCCA is a front for what is effectively a done deal, with four federal parties as willingly participants. It is also clear that Canada is to be a testing ground for what is being planned for other international jurisdictions.

Without a doubt, the main purpose of this redefinition of antisemitism is to create a serious chill on university campuses and in the media. Teachers will be afraid to discuss Israeli policies in their classrooms, while Israeli Apartheid Weeks will be prohibited by administrations on campuses across the country for fear of being charged with inciting hate crimes. Likewise, articles critical of Israeli government policies or actions (as rare as they are) will likely disappear from the print and electronic media. It is possible that websites could be shut down. Organizations critical of Israel will be unable to rent public venues for meetings. Already, I've heard that some Palestinian support groups fear they may be charged under hate laws. In other words, what we will be seeing, in fact are already seeing, is a new form of McCarthyism. For me, as a Jew, one of the worst ironies here is that should such legislation actually come to pass, as seems likely antisemitism will actually *increase*. As Bahija Reghai has noted, by equating Jews with Israel and Zionism, the CPCCA reinforces "the reductionist and false notion that all Jews are responsible for the acts of the state of Israel." It is worth noting that this past Wednesday (January 27), speaking at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu referred to himself as "leader of the Jewish people."

I don't think it's too extreme to say that if the proposals likely to come out of the CPCCA become law, meetings such as this one will be very risky undertakings in future. I should also point out that, if this legislation comes into being, we will be in the bizarre situation of being able, in Canada, to stand up and roundly criticize our own government (for, say, something like prorogation of parliament or poor treatment of Afghani prisoners) in a way that we won't be able to criticize a foreign government. Something is terribly wrong with this picture.

So, here's what can you do: first, start by taking a look at the [CPCCA website](#), so you can see for yourself where this Coalition is headed. We are also asking all of you here tonight to write letters to your MPs and party leaders, which you can easily do via e-mail, expressing opposition to the participation of their party in the CPCCA. Two Vancouver MPs, [Joyce Murray](#) & [Hedy Fry](#) actually sit on this committee, so if you're in their riding it's particularly important that you write them. However, since all four parties in the House of Commons currently sit on this body, none of them should be immune from our criticism. In your letter, be sure to ask for information regarding CPCCA funding. (Surely MPs should know who's funding a committee they're sitting on!) If you are connected to one of the federal parties as a volunteer or donor, or if you can speak on behalf of an organization, your letter would be particularly important. Also, check out the website of the [Seriously Free Speech Committee](#) and keep up to date on this issue. And help us spread the word about the secretive and dangerous CPCCA by inviting someone to speak to your group.

As I noted at the outset, the term "solidarity" is not just about pity and charitable handouts. What is happening to the Palestinian people today will likely have serious consequences for us here in Canada tomorrow. However, history has shown that the degree to which governments, all governments, take away peoples' democratic rights and freedoms to serve their own ends always depends on the degree to which we allow them to get away with it. Together, let's insure that the current government doesn't take away our right to free speech.