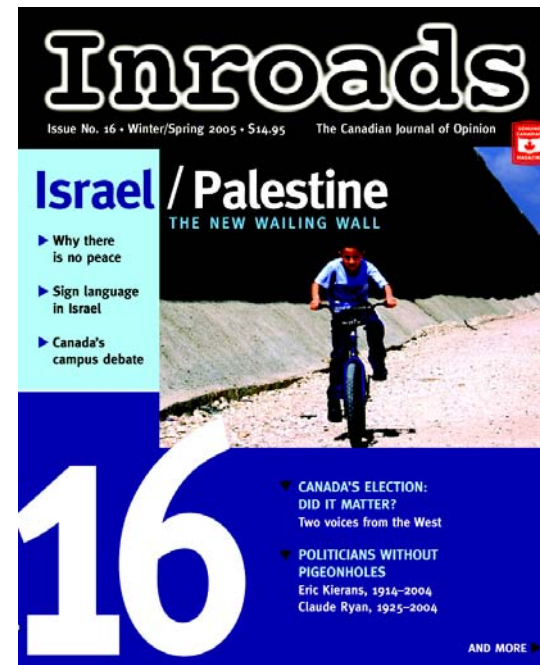


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# The debate on Canadian campuses

Bringing back democracy and the spirit of scholarship

by Howard Stein and Noemi Gal-Or

**T**HE UNIVERSITY IS A UNIQUE INSTITUTION IN SOCIETY. IT SHOULD, everywhere and always, be a place where all views, even unpopular ones (including, say, support for cannibalism), can be heard. Popularity does not determine the validity of a point of view.

However, in Canada, several related confrontations involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have recently challenged the concept of democracy and legitimate debate at universities. The spirit of scholarship on campuses has been adversely affected as limits have been placed on debate, free speech and academic freedom, people have been intimidated and harassed, and power disparities have been abused.

In response, and to counter defamation and intolerance of Jews and supporters of the state of Israel on campuses, a group of professors and staff at postsecondary institutions in British Columbia has organized the British Columbia Campus Action Coa-

lition ([www.bc-cac.org](http://www.bc-cac.org)). The initiative is premised on a commitment to promoting mutual respect and understanding as well as coexistence and peace, while discouraging polarization, belligerence and hatred in matters related to the Middle East.

In the pages that follow we analyze the current situation and its implications, and propose a prescription for improvement.

### Limiting debate, free speech and academic freedom

An anti-intellectual approach that seeks to limit debate, free speech and academic freedom has been increasingly present on Canadian campuses. It has manifested itself



On September 9, 2002, a protest against a scheduled speech by former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at Concordia University in Montreal led to clashes between protesters and riot police and resulted in the cancellation of the speech. LUKE ANDREWS PHOTO

in a number of major strategies: preventing speakers from arriving at their destination, preventing speakers from being heard, restricting opposing views, exploiting emotion and using propaganda, and preventing rebuttal.

While both sides – pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli – have often advanced essentially skewed arguments, it has been the pro-Palestinian camp that has exceeded the bounds of civilized debate by also employing beyond-verbal antidemocratic means. Speakers have been physically prevented from appearing on campuses. For example:

- On September 9, 2002, a protest against a scheduled speech by former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at Concordia University in Montreal led to

clashes between protesters and riot police and resulted in the cancellation of the speech.

- When students at York University in Toronto invited Dr. Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, a Philadelphia-based think tank that works to define and promote American interests in the Middle East, to speak on January 28, 2003, the York student union prevented the sponsoring students from using student union facilities for the event.
- On March 14, 2004, protesters shouted down Ya'akov Brosh, the Israeli Consul General in Toronto, who was invited to speak at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C.

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Another method of reducing debate is to ensure that opposing opinions are not expressed at conferences. For example:

- In the fall of 2003, the University of Toronto administration prevented anti-Israel groups from holding a Palestinian Solidarity Conference, when conference organizers required all attendees to sign a “Basis of Unity,” which affirmed that Israel was a “racist apartheid state.”
- On February 8, 2003, the Simon Fraser University Political Science Student Union, History Student Union and Communications Student Union held a conference entitled “Dispelling Misconceptions: Media, Conflict and Imperialism in the Middle East.” The organizers invited exclusively speakers known for their strong pro-Palestinian views.

Although groups have the right to invite the participants they want, this approach does not “promote the academic, intellectual ... concerns/interests of Communication students,” as the Communications Student Union constitution stipulates. Furthermore, the academics on the panel did not seem to have any reservations about participating or passing themselves off as academic role models for their students even though, as SFU president Michael Stevenson has said, the university is committed to the “values of discovery, diversity and dialogue.”

Supposedly, on Canadian campuses, students and faculty are expected to form their own opinions after listening to all points of view. They would be the last ones to need, or want, anyone to decide for them which speakers are acceptable. One would surmise that those energetically engaged in limiting the expression of other points of view have something to hide or fear, and that juxtaposing factual claims might discredit their cause.

Based on their own claim to respect human rights, the campus debate obstructers and their public supporters are, not surprisingly, the first to complain when the shoe is on the other foot. For example, in November 2002, after Concordia University won a 10-day court injunction upholding its three-month moratorium against Middle East debates on university property, the pro-Palestinian Concordia Student Union invited Judy Rebick and NDP MPs Svend Robinson and Libby Davies to use Concordia’s downtown Montreal campus to protest “a blatant violation of students’ right to free speech and assembly.” Ironically, the moratorium was initiated because this very same student union had denied these rights to pro-Israel students at Concordia.

We could not find examples of the pro-Israel side using such antidemocratic means in Canada. However, it has been guilty of breaking campus rules of conduct. On March 16, 2004, at York University, 25 pro-Palestinian students held a mock checkpoint in Vari Hall, a building where demonstrations are banned. Outside Vari Hall, Hillel, the Jewish students’ association, organized a vigil for victims of terrorism. A clash started when these students entered Vari Hall for a counter-demonstration. As both groups had broken the code of conduct signed by all student groups at York, they were both properly punished by being forced to cancel all their planned activities for the following week.

As far as we can ascertain, the pro-Israel side has not interfered with speakers who condemn Israel. For example, there was no fuss when, in November 2003, the student union at Vancouver’s Langara College invited a guest to speak on Israel as an apartheid country. In another case, in March 2003, Hillel at UBC organized pro-Israel students

to attend a public meeting of the UBC NDP on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The panel was made up of four pro-Palestinian speakers: Svend Robinson, Libby Davies, Gabor Maté and Khaled Barakat (from the Palestine Solidarity Group). The pro-Israel students carried signs that had “I disagree” printed on one side and “I agree” printed on the other side. Rather than heckling and preventing the speakers from talking, they held up the signs in unison to show their agreement or disagreement. Surprisingly, the “I agree” sign was displayed several times. In fact, it was a respectful meeting with a small dose of humour.

### Intimidation and harassment

Intimidation and harassment are now commonplace on campuses. They are the corollaries of the limitation on debate, free speech and academic freedom. There have been physical violence, verbal assaults, hate calls, threats and vandalism:

- In November 2003, representatives of the Langara Student Union verbally harassed and disparaged a member of the Langara Israel Advocacy Club when she sought permission to put up posters to advertise a pro-Israel event.
- At SFU, attendees left the shut-down talk by the Israeli Consul General out of intimidation engendered by the protesters.
- In March 2004, at UBC, Hillel received hate calls for sponsoring a talk by pro-Israel Muslim activist Irshad Manji.
- Israel advocacy posters advertising events at SFU and UBC are regularly torn down.

Closely related to these acts has been the targeting of Jews and the use of anti-Semitic stereotypes. Along with supporters of Israel, Jewish students who are not at all politi-

cally involved have been attacked. Jewish students, faculty and staff are afraid to wear skullcaps and other Jewish symbols for fear of physical assault or verbal abuse. In the Concordia confrontation, two people, a rabbi and a Holocaust survivor, were physically assaulted by pro-Palestinian protesters, who also spat on and kicked others trying to attend the talk.

Vandals did between \$5,000 and \$10,000 worth of damage to Hillel House at UBC in the spring of 2004, and a site celebrating the Jewish holiday of Sukkot was destroyed at York in the fall of 2003. Ironically, Jewish students were attacked by supposedly pro-peace protesters at York in the spring of 2003. In March 2004 Leo Adler, of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center in Toronto, speaking at SFU on anti-Semitism, was harassed by pro-Palestinian activists. Martin Himel, who made the Global TV documentary *Confrontation at Concordia*, described other expressions of hate (National Post, July 15, 2003):

*A classic antisemitic poster was paraded at the forefront of an anti-Iraq war protest. It showed a caricature of a Jew with a religious skullcap, a lurid smile, dollar signs coming out of his head. He is being “masturbated” by an American woman and out “comes” Iraqi oil ... The Nazi cartoons in “Der Stuermer” couldn’t have done a better job. It’s all there: the Jewish world conspiracy, the disgusting innuendoes, and the Jewish control of money – classic antisemitism.*

Thus, the anti-Israel campaign is not targeted at pro-Israel opinion alone, but is aimed at the bearers of the opinions for what and who most of them are, namely Jews. The anti-Israel argument all too often quickly mutates into classical anti-Semitism.

## Power disparities

Power disparities allow one side to have an unfair advantage over the opposing side. Such disparities exist between faculty and students, but can also develop among faculty or students when an interest group gains control of an organization. “Hijacking” student governments and clubs, misappropriating student media such as newspapers and radio stations, controlling space and other facilities, exerting undue influence on faculty groups and unions, misusing the power position of faculty members in their relations with students, encouraging groupthink on controversial issues, restricting academic freedom for those hold-

### **Students and faculty would be the last ones to need, or want, anyone to decide for them which speakers are acceptable.**

ing minority views, and academic boycotts all represent abuse of power differentials.

Democracy on campuses has been threatened by interest groups employing such tactics as a means to further the pro-Palestinian cause. The abuse of the power disparity has contributed to the suppression of individual and minority rights. To allow democratic and fair debate, universities have devised codes of conduct. Thus, the York University administration rightly intervened when an outgoing pro-Palestinian student government refused to cede power to the newly elected Progress Not Politics group after a fair vote on November 27, 2003. The administration threatened to take over the body’s finances unless it obeyed its own electoral rules.

However, in more than one case university administrators have been reluctant to

enforce their own codes of conduct to secure a democratic environment. For example, the leaders of the confrontation at Concordia suffered minimal consequences. According to Jonathan Kay in the National Post (September 4, 2003), a year after the confrontation seven of the 10 students charged had either had charges dropped or were “merely slapped with a few dozen hours of community service.” Two had been suspended for one semester, while the tenth case was under appeal. Kay commented,

*When a group of militant Palestinian sympathizers are able to shut down an Israeli statesman, it signals to students that some viewpoints don’t qualify for protection ... By giving the rioters what they deserved, the university might at least have signaled that things would change – that pro-Israel speech would henceforth receive the same protections as its anti-Israel equivalent. The fact this didn’t happen is more than a failure in discipline: It represents a failure in the school’s education mission.*

Similarly, in March 2003, at Carleton University in Ottawa, the administration denied Jewish students the right to protest against an anti-Israel display made up of a mock cemetery that read “Made in Israel” and feigned security checkpoints.

In other instances, administrations refuse – or claim they lack the power – to exercise authority over university institutions such as student unions and newspapers. This academic allowance for fair and responsible student self-government has been abused several times in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian debate by student newspapers controlled by editors or student unions controlled by executives hostile to Israel:

- In the spring of 2004, the McMaster Uni-

versity student government summarily put a Zionist club on “probation” and appointed a former president of the Muslim Student Association as a “governor” of the group.

- The Concordia Student Union banned Hillel from campus and funding.
- In November 2003, Ishmael Khaldi, an Israeli Bedouin, attempted to speak on “Israel’s Multicultural and Diverse Society” at Langara College, just a week after the Langara Student Union sponsored a talk on “Why Israel is an Apartheid State.” The student union denied use of one of its rooms for the talk, as well as space for posters to publicize the event.

“When an anti-Israel group gets control of a student governing council,” says University of Toronto professor and Canadian Jewish Congress president Ed Morgan, “the administration does not like to get involved in student governance.”

Academics can restrict free speech by punishing dissenting students with poor grades, or rejecting colleagues for faculty positions or refusing to invite them to campus appearances. The faculty association at the University of Victoria publishes a newsletter, The Ring, which featured a virulently anti-Israel article by a retired professor. Prior to the publication of the article, the author was allowed to solicit funds for a trip to the Middle East by accessing the faculty association email list. The Ring has now ceased publishing political opinion pieces and it will no longer distribute the faculty association list for private political purposes.

Zac Kaye, executive director of Hillel of Greater Toronto, sees difficult challenges in the classroom, where according to anecdotal reports professors have commonly been critical of Israel, and in trade unions such

as CUPE that take stridently anti-Israel positions. The anti-Israel side often uses propaganda and bullying to discredit its opponents. For example, a faculty member at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, was quoted by Jonathan Kay in the National Post (August 9, 2003), as saying, “My sole concern is indeed to help the Palestinians and I try to play for keeps. I am not interested in truth, or justice or understanding or anything else so far as it serves that purpose.” Such sentiments from a member of an academic institution are unacceptable.

We know of several instances where UBC students appealed their grades for papers showing Israel in a good light; grades improved considerably when re-marked by another professor. In most cases, however, students were reluctant to pursue the matter. Such reluctance is an indication of the new atmosphere on campus.

In the spring of 2003, the University of Victoria School of Social Work published on its website an “official” anti-Israel policy statement. Several weeks later, the Vice-President Academic ordered it removed, arguing that the action vitiated the principle of free speech, that the school had no special expertise in this area and that the statement could be misconstrued as “official” university policy. Presenting a statement as an “official” policy has the effect of emitting a misleading and pretentious air of authority.

## Academic boycotts

The phenomenon of academic boycotts recently spread across Europe but so far has not occurred in Canada. Such partisan action is a form of collective punishment. Even seen from the point of view of the boycotters, it shuts down the voices of dissenting

academics at the boycotted institution. Clearly, it limits the academic freedom of those with minority voices in the boycotting institution who wish to maintain or develop relations with the boycotted institution. From a universal “public good” perspective, the price of slowing down the progress of academic discovery may turn out to be much higher than the expected political benefit resulting from the boycott.

For example, three years ago, a Norwegian scientist refused to send the cloned DNA of a red blood cell growth factor to an investigator in Israel because she was boycotting Israeli universities. She relented after Howard Stein informed her that the Israeli researcher was collaborating with a Palestinian researcher in Ramallah to find a cure for thalassemia, a lethal blood disorder of Arab children.

Israel, its academics and its institutions of higher learning seem to have been singled out for these academic boycotts. The hypocrisy underlying the decision of whom to boycott are most conspicuous in the absence of calls for similar boycotts against academics and institutions of higher learning in other countries whose human rights records have come under fire, such as Syria, Iran, Libya, Colombia, Zimbabwe, Sudan, China, North Korea, Myanmar ...

### A prescription for improvement

Expanding debate and liberating speech is at least implicit in the mandate of any university governing body. To allow a university administration to exercise its neutral role as guarantor of academic freedom, we recommend the following:

- The administration must be notified in a timely fashion of any controversial event

so as to be able to provide for appropriate security and independent observers.

- The administration must not allow speakers to be prevented from entering or speaking on campus.

Universities must encourage as broad a spectrum of opinions as possible. Enforceable rules would not be practical, but a gold standard toward which those on campus should strive could be adopted. We recommend the following:

- The administration should promote the expression of opposing views of students, faculty, staff and guests, and organizers of events should make a commitment to allow these voices to be heard.
- If an event features a speaker, then questions from opponents in the audience must not be squelched.
- If an event features a panel, reasonable attempts should be made to include someone with divergent views. (However, such goals would not apply to political associations with vested partisan interests. They would apply to academic clubs – such as a history club – to prevent them from being politicized and taken over by an interest group.)
- Although opinions can be held freely, patently false statements of “fact” should bear some censure in the form of cumulative academic consequences similar to acts of plagiarism or “cooking of results” in published experiments.

Intimidation and harassment, whether in the form of physical violence, verbal assaults, vandalism or acts of racism (including anti-Semitism and anti-Islam), must be opposed and forbidden by the institution’s administration, faculty, staff and student bodies. We recommend the following:

- If the code of conduct is breached, the violators must be subject to punishment.
- Any such event, regardless of the identity (or anonymity) of the responsible person, must entail a unified and steadfast denunciation by students (including student government and newspapers), faculty and their groups and unions, the administration, senate, board of directors, alumni and the community at large.
- If university presidents, the senate and board of governors shirk the duty to preserve, secure and encourage academic freedom, free debate and an environment on campus free of intimidation and harassment, then the provincial ministry responsible for higher education may have to be called to the task. Perpetrators may have to be expelled and prevented from trespassing on university property.

Power disparities are characteristic of any social community, and the university is no different. However, the university, which is presumed to be the seat of intellectual leadership in any society, must be structured so as to guarantee that its bodies demonstrate fairness, openness and tolerance. We recommend the following:

- Student governments must be held accountable for, and prevented from, refusing to allot facilities and space in an equitable manner to all student groups, whether the groups are white supremacists, fascists, anarchists, pro-lifers or believers that the world is flat.
- Students should have avenues provided to them to deal with faculty bias against them, including remedies for the consequences of such bias.
- Official group positions should be prohibited unless they originate in an inherently partisan group.

Boycotts on the basis of citizenship, gender, religion, colour or any other such criterion are explicitly ruled out by the principle of the “universality of science enshrined in Statute 5 of the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU).” Resolutions to safeguard this principle were passed by – among others – the American Physical Society, the American Mathematical Society, and the Modern Language Association (MLA).

We recommend that Canadian academic associations adopt a similar position to that formulated in the preamble to the council of the American Physical Society’s 1989 statement on the international nature of

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physics and international cooperation, which it cited in its more recent statement against the call to boycott Israeli scientists:

*Science belongs to all humanity and transcends national boundaries. As in the past, science can serve as a bridge for mutual understanding across political and ideological divisions and as a vehicle for the enhancement of peace. In particular, APS believes that it is important at this time to strive for more open dialogue among scientists to enhance international cooperation.*

If these measures are carried out, then it will be possible to debate questions related to the Israeli-Palestinian question in a civilized manner, and the debate can be redirected onto democratic and informed tracks. ■

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