

Barbara Kay shares her 'feelings' about Israel Apartheid Week

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You've all heard of "Israel Apartheid Week." But how about Israel Peace Week (IPW)?

IPW is an initiative by Hasbara Fellowships, a training program that teaches students to counter anti-Israel propaganda with a positive message, summed up in its motto: "All we are saying is give peace a chance."

The campaigns focus on evidence of Israel's desire for a lasting peace with its neighbours. Materials and activities illuminate the outsized accomplishments of this diverse, rights-respecting democracy, and explain the existential perils of its situation. What one might call the IPW's "sunshine" approach is non-confrontational.

IPW, which took place this year between Feb. 28 and March 8, is deliberately timed to anticipate the just-concluded Israel Apartheid Week (IAW), March 5-13. IAW has been around so long, it's running out of steam on many campuses. The Arab Spring has sapped its relevance. And this year, IAW McGill had additional competition for attention from anti-tuition-increase demonstrations.

Perhaps it was disgruntlement over IAW's lacklustre performance in 2012 that motivated an aggrieved student (supposedly anonymous, but some clues point to a well-known IAW activist) to formally complain to McGill's student-society Equity Committee about the mildly satiric title of a recently held fundraising event for McGill Students for Israel (MSFI) — "Israel: A Party."

In fact, an Equity Committee Officer already had directed MSFI to change the title, threatening, by email, "possible consequences such as suspension of club status" if they refused. Her rationale was that even such gentle mockery trivialized the word "apartheid" and the experiences of many of the world's oppressed people, citing as well the indignation of "various colleagues and personal friends" regarding Israel's oppression of Palestinians.

The president of MSFI, Lainie Schwartz, changed the title of the event. But she responded by return e-mail with a defence of the original choice. She noted the private event was (as I can attest, since I attended) a "festive," not a political affair, advertised only through Facebook.

"A Party" was not meant to mock Palestinians. Rather, the concept mocked the hypocrisy — a time-honoured target of satire of attaching such a wicked canard to Israel. It is IAW, not Israel, that mocks the suffering imposed by real apartheid regimes. "[MSFI] finds the usage of the term [apartheid] by the complainants to be every bit as insulting and demeaning as they perceive our mocking of it," Schwartz wrote.

What most troubled Schwartz was that legitimization of the complaint by McGill's student society (SSMU) via its equity committee "implicitly recognizes and affirms the misinformed notion that Israel is an apartheid state." Ultimately, Schwartz refused a supervised mediation session with the complainant, because it meant signing a confidentiality agreement.

I spoke by telephone to Ryan Thom, SSMU's Equity Outreach Coordinator. He asserted that Equity "has to protect people's safety" and is "mandated to take action" when complainants don't feel "physically, emotionally or psychologically safe. I asked how the words "Israel: A Party" compromised the complainant's safety. Thom didn't know: He admitted Equity had not probed the complainant's "feelings" to gain insight into them or assess them. And yet the Equity Officer who emailed Schwartz had not hesitated to probe MSFI for "more insight into why you chose the title 'Israel-A Party.'" It reminded me of the Alberta human-rights mandarin who asked Ezra Levant what feelings he had in his heart when he published the Danish cartoons of Mohammed.

I drew Thom's attention to the aggressively public "apartheid" wall erected by the complainant's friends in the centre of McGill's downtown Montreal campus, where virtually all students are forced to view it in their daily rounds. Did he agree that many pro-Israel students would not only find the wall offensive, but might even feel emotionally or

psychologically “unsafe”? He agreed that might well be the case.

Well then, I pressed, could a complainant expressing “feelings” of being offended or “unsafe” expect the wall to be removed at Equity’s direction? Apparently not: “Every situation being unique,” Thom could not speculate on the outcome of such an initiative. Well, I will speculate that, based on precedent, IAW would not be sanctioned.

Nor would I want it to be. I’m against campus Equity Committees for the same reason I’m against Human Rights Tribunals. Their existence kindles the totalitarian impulse to suppress politically incorrect thought and speech. In other words, it is my “feeling” is that they encourage “equity apartheid” and create an “unsafe space” for “freedom of speech.”

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