

Canada: Right-wing furor over student protest against Netanyahu

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25 September 2002

Canada's political establishment and media have raised a furor over a student protest that forced the cancellation of a speech by former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at Montreal's Concordia University. Turning reality on its head, they have depicted the protest against Netanyahu's September 9 speech as a grievous and violent assault on the right to free speech and are now invoking this malicious distortion to press for limits on campus political activity.

Of the many vitriolic condemnations of the Concordia protest, the shrillest was delivered by Israel Asper, the principal shareholder in Canada's largest media empire, CanWest Global Communications, a close friend of Prime Minister Jean Chretien, and himself one of the principal sponsors of Netanyahu's Canadian tour.

Speaking in Ottawa the day after Netanyahu had been unable to deliver his Concordia speech, Asper accused the protesters of acting like Nazi brownshirts. "The minority of a rabble, a rioting group of essentially thugs, lawbreakers, deployed a technique ... introduced ... 70 years ago by Adolph Hitler and his brownshirts." Netanyahu was only slightly more restrained, saying the protest was "a microcosm of what we are facing every day in Israel" and urging Canadian authorities to take steps to ensure Middle Eastern zealots do not disrupt Canadian society.

That Netanyahu—the spokesman for the most hard-line and militaristic elements of the Zionist establishment—can count on the support of the Aspers and CanWest to promote his noxious views underscores the absurdity of the claim that the Concordia protest threatened free speech. On concluding his Canadian tour, Netanyahu flew to Washington, where on September 12 he addressed the most powerful group of

legislators in the world—the US Congress.

What the Concordia events and the right-wing furor they have provoked do exemplify is the corporate media's manipulation and manufacturing of the news. Press and television reports painted a lurid picture of students running amuck, although no more than a few window panes were broken and some chairs thrown. Moreover, most if not all of this occurred only after truncheon-wielding riot police had sought to clear protesters blocking access to the venue of Netanyahu's speech and fired tear gas and pepper spray.

Just as importantly, the news media has parroted the claims of Zionist organizations that the protest was anti-Semitic, although it was explicitly anti-Zionist, not anti-Jewish, and included students of both Arab and Jewish ethnicity. The *Globe and Mail*, Canada's leading national newspaper, went so far as run a piece on the Concordia protest titled "The Day of the Broken Glass"—a crude attempt to associate the anti-Netanyahu protest with Kristallnacht, the night in 1938 when Nazi supporters and sympathizers stormed Jewish houses and businesses across Germany.

Two further points need to be made. The first pertains to Netanyahu's politics and the purpose of his Canadian tour; the second concerns the provocative character of Netanyahu's speaking at Concordia University and the big business-inspired drive to quell campus political activism.

As Israel's Likud Prime Minister from 1996 to 1999, Netanyahu worked tirelessly to undermine the Oslo Accords, although these gave the Palestinians only the shadow of a national homeland and were designed so as ensure the dominant position of the Zionist state. Central to this policy was Netanyahu's promotion of the religious fundamentalist and fascistic settler movement. Currently, he is jockeying to replace Sharon

as Likud leader and prime minister by criticizing him for not moving fast enough to destroy the Palestinian Authority and exile, if not eliminate, the current PLO leadership. To Sharon's embarrassment, Netanyahu recently spearheaded Likud's adoption of a motion opposing the creation of a Palestinian state—now or ever.

Netanyahu's undelivered Concordia speech was a clarion call for Israel's military to be unfettered of any international diplomatic constraints—so “Yasser Arafat's terrorist regime ... [can] be toppled”—and an appeal for support for a US invasion of Iraq. “Contrary to conventional wisdom,” claimed Netanyahu, the Middle East has been destabilized by “the constant pressure on Israel to show restraint.” Not content with dubbing Arafat kith and kin of Osama bin Laden, the ex-Israeli prime minister made a crude ethnic slur, labeling a Palestinian state as “Arafat-istan.”

The choice of Concordia as the venue for Netanyahu's only campus speech was no accident. A university with a large working class and immigrant student body—including 5,000 students of Arab descent—Concordia has emerged as something of a center of student activism and dissent.

Last year, the Concordia administration was roundly criticized by the corporate media after it bowed to student requests that they be allowed to postpone final exams so as to participate in protests against the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City. Eager to prove it had gotten the message, the university administration responded by seizing on the events of September 11 to orchestrate a campaign to force the resignation of the Students Council, which had identified itself with the Palestinian cause, then banned a pro-Palestinian rally on the grounds that it could turn violent.

These measures have failed to quell campus activism. In a referendum last fall, a majority of students opposed Canadian participation in the US war on Afghanistan.

Within this context, the invitation to Netanyahu was a blatant provocation—an attempt to bolster the Zionist cause on campus, by staging a pro-Israel rally. The organizers' political objectives are underlined by the fact that they insisted the only suitable venue for Netanyahu's speech was the most important campus building, brushing off university suggestions of alternate sites.

In the aftermath of the September 9 clash, the administration has moved to further stifle political dissent—and all in the name of defending free speech. Within hours of Netanyahu's speech being cancelled, University Chancellor Frederick Lowy declared a moratorium on campus events related to the Middle East and cancelled a planned appearance by Norman Finkelstein, an outspoken critic of the Israeli occupation. Despite protests by student representatives, the university Senate voted last week to ban all public activity relating to the Middle East for the remainder of the semester and to bar student organizations from using the mezzanine in the building for displays and promotional tables.



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