

When Israel Backers Claim to be Anti-racist, One Needs to Ask Questions

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What to call someone who claims to oppose racism, except for that directed against Palestinians?

Judge someone by what they have done and continue to do. Consider the source. These thoughts ran through my mind as I struggled to write about Bernie Farber's standing among some Left/liberals.

After Israel recently [solidified its apartheid](#) regime, a Facebook friend posted an opinion by illustrious pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim [titled](#) "Today, I Am Ashamed to Be an Israeli." While expressing opposition to its recent entrenchment of Jewish supremacism, the story effectively denied the ethnic cleansing of Palestine by claiming,

"the founding fathers of the State of Israel who signed the Declaration [of independence] considered the principle of equality as the bedrock of the society they were building."

More than this sop to colonial history, my leftist Facebook friend's post piqued my ire because it highlighted that the article came from Farber, who worked at the now defunct Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) between 1984 and 2011. In response to my complaint about citing the former CJC CEO approvingly, Farber wrote,

"I will continue to work for mutual understanding and do my best to see all sides. You will of course see what you wish from your one-sided pedestal and be critical of anyone who remains a progressive Zionist which I am."

From the "pedestal" on which I observe Farber, I see an individual who has repeatedly labelled supporters of Palestinian rights as racist. After the Canadian Union of Public Employees (Ontario) passed a 2009 motion in support of the Palestinian led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement Farber [claimed](#), "anti-semitism is once again amongst us." For Farber the resolution was "[bigoted](#) and discriminatory and anti-Jewish" because only one country was targeted. "The sole target is Jews, is Israel," he said.

In a 2010 letter to the *Toronto Star* denouncing Israeli Apartheid Week CJC's CEO [wrote](#),

“Anything that promotes the destruction, demonization and delegitimization of Israel, the world’s only Jewish state, is inherently anti-Semitic. To falsely accuse Israel, and by extension the vast majority of the world’s Jews who support the Jewish state, of ‘apartheid,’ is a form of anti-Semitic bullying.”

When the Israeli military killed [1,400 Palestinians](#) (including 345 children) over 22 days in 2008-09 Farber [denounced](#) those protesting the slaughter across the country for their purported “vile, disgusting, hateful rhetoric of the kind that should be absolutely frightening to Canadians.” Further stoking anti-Arab/Muslim sentiment, he labeled the protests “[uncivil, un-Canadian](#), that demonize Jews and Israelis.” Farber called on the police to investigate the burning of an Israeli flag and a small number of individuals with signs deemed “pro-Hamas” or comparing Israel’s actions to the Nazis.

In 2003 Farber lobbied for noted Islamophobe and anti-Palestinian activist Daniel Pipes to speak at York University.

“[It would have](#) set a very, very unacceptable precedent to cancel it because of students who didn’t like or what he had to say,” said the then executive director of CJC Ontario.

In 1996 Pipes asserted that Islam “[would seem to have nothing functional to offer](#)” and six years earlier said:

“[Western European](#) societies are unprepared for the massive immigration of brown-skinned peoples cooking strange foods and maintaining different standards of hygiene ... All immigrants bring exotic customs and attitudes, but Muslim customs are more troublesome than most.”

The year before speaking at York University Pipes [launched](#) Campus Watch, which created “dossiers” on professors and academic institutions viewed as critical of Israel and more recently, wrote a piece [titled](#) “How 99 Percent of ‘Palestine Refugees’ Are Fake.”

Farber certainly didn’t support Pipes as a principled defender of free speech. In fact, Farber repeatedly promoted hate speech restrictions and a few years later the CJC pressured the York administration against [holding](#) an academic conference entitled Israel/Palestine: Mapping Models of Statehood and Paths to Peace. Farber also [applauded](#) the Stephen Harper government’s 2009 move to block former British MP George Galloway from speaking in Canada, writing: “[George Galloway](#) enables terrorism.”

After Adbusters juxtaposed photos of the World War II Warsaw Ghetto with images of Gaza, Farber penned a *National Post* op-ed titled “[Selling anti-Semitism](#) in the book stores”. It urged people to complain to stores selling the Vancouver-based magazine and a week later Shoppers Drug Mart told Adbusters it would no longer sell its magazine.

Aligning himself with Doug and Rob Ford, in 2010 Farber called on Toronto Pride to ban Queers Against Israeli Apartheid from its parade. In an over-the-top *Toronto Star* opinion piece he (co)wrote,

“[you’ve got](#) to hand it to the organizers of Toronto’s annual gay pride parade.

With their cowardly volte face in allowing Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (QuAIA) to march, organizers have pulled off the PR nightmare hat-trick: bowing to the bullying of political correctness; violating their own core philosophy by readmitting a group rooted in hate and demonization; and shifting media focus off their main objective.”

As executive director of CJC Ontario Farber joined US Jewish groups’ [campaign to suppress](#) the 1998 publication of *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth*, which was a rebuttal of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s widely distributed *Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. The Norman Finkelstein-led project included an expanded version of an article by Ruth Bettina Birn, chief historian for Canada’s Nazi war crimes unit. Farber claimed that Birn was lending her name to Finkelstein’s “[anti-Israel outbursts](#)”, which were “an insult” to Jews. The CJC tried to intimidate the longstanding Nazi hunter through her government employer.

In another attempt to punish those in any way associated with Finkelstein, Farber threatened to take the York Region education board to the human-rights commission if it [did not dismiss](#) a Palestinian-Canadian from its race relations committee. Farber was angry that Bader Abu Zahra distributed a review of Finkelstein’s *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* at a teachers’ conference to discuss including “Holocaust and Anti-racist education in History, English and Social Science courses.”

When former Assembly of First Nations (AFN) head David Ahenakew made anti-Semitic comments in 2002 Farber (correctly) criticized them. But he also used Ahenakew’s abhorrent comments to smear Palestine solidarity activists. Alluding to the September 2002 protest against Benjamin Netanyahu at Concordia University and support for the second Palestinian intifada, Farber claimed Ahenakew “[felt](#) comfortable at the time to say what he’s been thinking for a long time.” Farber then used Ahenakew’s anti-Semitic comments to push AFN leaders to support a state stealing indigenous Palestinians’ land. As part of AFN/CJC rapprochement Grand Chief Phil Fontaine [participated](#) in a CJC organize tour to Israel.

Farber attacked the United Church of Canada for supporting Palestinian rights and Independent Jewish Voices (IJV).

“[It almost](#) sends shivers down our spine that the United Church of Canada won’t speak out against documents which on their face are anti-Semitic,” said Farber, regarding a number of Palestine solidarity resolutions submitted to its 2009 national meeting.

Amidst an aggressive campaign targeting the United Church, the CJC head opined, “[that a mainstream](#) Christian faith group would provide funding to create an anti-Zionist, and anti-Jewish group is absolutely astounding.”

Farber has repeatedly denigrated IJV, which supports the Palestinian [civil society’s call](#) to put economic and diplomatic pressure on Israel. He called IJV a “[small, radical](#) rump group”, “[a rump](#) on the edge of Jewish society”, a “[fringe group](#)” that spews “vile, anti-Zionist” rhetoric, “[a minuscule](#), fringe group” that backs the “anti-Semitic” claim that Israel practices apartheid, etc.

At the same time that he disparaged IJV, Farber gave [political cover](#) to the Jewish Defence League (JDL), which recruited in Jewish high schools and participated in Toronto’s Annual

Israel Walk. According to Andy Lehrer, JDL head Meir Weinstein [spoke glowingly](#) of Farber. After being asked to do so for years, Farber finally distanced himself and the CJC from the JDL in 2011. Highlighting the tension between those who back its anti-Palestinian posture, but oppose the JDL's alliances with fascist/white supremacist organizations, Farber denounced the group after it [rallied in support](#) of Britain's extremist English Defence League.

In response to my posting some of the above information on Facebook Farber complained that,

"I haven't worked at the CJC for over 7 years. And you have no idea of my work since then."

While Farber is no longer a leading proponent of the idea that expressing support for Palestinians is "anti-Semitism", now challenges some of the Islamophobia he previously stoked and is offside with the JDL, it would be a stretch to say he's broken from his CJC past. In 2015 Farber's Mosaic Institute [co-hosted](#) an event with the Consulate of Israel in Toronto and last year [he supported](#) the exclusion of IJV and the United Jewish People's Order from an Ontario anti-Semitism committee he co-led. In February Farber was a spokesperson for a JSpace Canada [press release calling](#) on the NDP convention to oppose a resolution that called for boycotting products from illegal Israeli settlements.

Despite this anti-Palestinian activity, many left/liberals partner with him. Alt weekly *Toronto Now* regularly publishes Farber's articles; anti-racist journalist/activist Desmond Cole [spoke with him](#) at a recent forum put on by Farber's Mosaic Institute; Judy Rebick, Sandy Hudson, Jerry Dias and others co-authored an op-ed with Farber calling on "[Progressive Voters To Rally Around Andrea Horwath](#)"; A slew of individuals have supported the new Farber-chaired Canadian Anti-Hate Network; the Treyf podcast interviewed him twice last year; the Torontoist quoted him in an article titled "[Toronto's Jewish Left is Alive and Well and Resisting Extremism](#)."

Of course, one could argue there is nothing wrong with interviewing someone you disagree with, partnering on an issue even if you differ on other subjects or citing a former pro-Israel activist to highlight that country's eroding support.

But, ask yourself this: Would a pro-union publication give voice to a prominent union-basher? And if that union-basher claimed to have changed, wouldn't the pro-union publication question him/her about the reasons for the change and their current opinion regarding unions?

It seems to me that supporters of Palestinian rights must, at a minimum, ask Farber similar questions before giving him voice as a "progressive" and "anti-racist".

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