

*Fwd: This is Why I am Proud to be a Canadian!*

**November 23, 2012**

**Conservative Cabinet Minister John Baird: 'Why Israel holds such a special place in my heart'**

What follows is the text of a keynote speech delivered by Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird to the Jewish National Fund's annual Negev Dinner, held at Ottawa's National Gallery on Tuesday night.

Ambassador Ziv, Rabbis, Honoured guests:

Thank you for the warm welcome; I am truly humbled to be tonight's honouree. I want to begin by thanking tonight's Dinner Chair Barbara Farber who has been a great friend and supporter of mine for many, many years. I am deeply grateful to you Barbara, your husband Len and your son Steven who recently served in my office. Your support and friendship over the years is deeply appreciated - as are all of your efforts in both the Jewish and general community. Tonight, I want to try something different. I want to depart from the traditional role as government spokesperson.

Instead of sharing the views you've likely heard before - from me, the Prime Minister, or any of my Cabinet colleagues, who are all strong supporters of the Jewish State, I want to share something a little more personal.

I want to share reflections on how I came to be such a strong supporter of Israel and why Israel holds such a special place in my heart.

At the outset, let me just say that true friends are measured by whether they are there for you when you need them most. Whether that support is steadfast, even when it's not popular or expedient to do so.

And, as we have seen this last week, these are indeed challenging times.

Hamas is targeting innocent civilians with an onslaught of rockets. It's a despicable act of terror, and yet, as Israel responds, as it has every right to, it is the target of condemnation.

Canada, however, stands by Israel's side.

Sadly, doing so invites a litany of hatred. Moments after I put out a statement standing with Israel, supporting its right to defend itself, I received a barrage of

vile reaction, most of which twisted the facts to such an extent, that truth was beyond recognition.

On Twitter, one person said I supported the burning of children in Gaza. Another accused me of playing settler-colonial diplomacy with the lives of Palestinians.

Views like this are rooted in ignorance, or worse.much worse.

In this context, my support for Israel is quite obvious, but it's an explanation that calls on me to share some of my personal history.

I grew up right here in the Nation's Capital. It was a peaceful, middle-class upbringing. In truth, it was a privileged existence and one I'm thankful to have had. I've lived my whole life in Nepean.

I've never had to fight to prove that I belong here.that this community defines who I am.

I've never had to fight a war to defend my right to live in this community.

I've never been exiled from my home.

I've never had to rebuild my nation.

I only point this out by way of contrast to the phoenix-like rising of the modern state of Israel, from a barren desert to the dynamic country we see today.

After 2,000 years of bitter exile, Zionism - the national expression of the Jewish people gave voice and shape to a dream that never left the Jewish conscience: the return of world Jewry to its ancestral homeland. It is quite simply breathtaking to behold what people like Theodor Herzl, Eliezer Ben- Yehuda and Chaim Weizmann accomplished against all odds. It's simply a miracle to behold.

Seventy years ago, my grandfather left Canada to fight the Nazis in the Second World War. I'm deeply influenced by his contribution to combating an evil which sought to exterminate the Jewish people.that moment in history when the Devil almost drove a stake through the heart of humanity.

The heavy spirit, the knotted stomach, and the paralysis of shock I felt as I learned details of the horrors of the Nazi era have been ingrained in my soul; they shook me to my core and have become part of my DNA.

To think that humankind was so vulnerable, that a sick and flawed theory on racial supremacy could use the full might and power of a state in a twisted and

depraved attempt to eradicate a whole race of fellow brothers and sisters. scarred me, and stays with me today.

My scar is merely figurative. It will never be as deep, or as real as the one that left its mark on a man I recently met in Boston. a Holocaust Survivor. a man who was thrown into the depths of hell and climbed back. a man, who like all European Jews, was targeted for merely existing.

After I spoke to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, this gentleman approached me and told me something I'll never forget. He clasped my shoulder from behind, slowly took my hand with both of his. looked me in the eye, and said "I wish there were more people like you before the war."

I have never been prouder to be a member of Stephen Harper's team; I have never felt a greater honour.

I tell you this story because just as I felt honoured, I also experienced deep sadness.

Yes, the horrors of the Holocaust are behind this one man. But the hatred that caused it, has cast itself in a new form.

Rather than target him personally, it targets the Jewish state.

That Israel is still the subject of hatred is deeply disturbing and one of the forces that drives my support for the Jewish State.

In choosing not to stand idly by as the age-old hatred of the Jewish people has been transferred to the "collective Jew," I have been speaking up against the new anti-Semitism that is so pervasive today.

It targets the Jewish people by targeting the Jewish homeland, as the source of injustice and conflict in the world.

It is perversely couched in the language of human rights.

Just as conventional anti-Semitism denied Jews the right to live as equal members of humanity, the new anti-Semitism denies the State of Israel the right to live as an equal member of the international community.

It's because of this distorted thinking that over one quarter of all UN resolutions condemning a state's human rights violations have been directed at Israel.

It purposely blurs the lines between Palestinian civilians and Hamas terrorists.

It turns a blind eye to the fact that if any other state were suffering from terrorism as Israel does today; there would be no question of its right to defend itself.

This is a self-evident right, indeed a responsibility in every case except when the question turns to Israel's obligation to protect its citizens from rockets attacks.

In the vernacular, Israel is portrayed as the aggressor because it fits the narrative ironically echoed by so much of the media: "It all began when Israel retaliated".

Worse still, when this new anti-Semitism expresses itself in the call for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people, it is no longer hate-speech, it is incitement to genocide. And we have to name it for what it is.

We cannot dismiss the Iranian regime's calls for Israel to be wiped off the face of the earth as mere hyperbole.

History has taught us that genocide is preceded by hyperbole. In fact, the genocidal horrors of the Holocaust were made possible by the deliberate incitement of hatred against and demonization of the Jewish people.

Our job then, is to expose this new anti-Semitism for what it is.

For a country like Canada, the easy thing to do would be simply to go along with anti-Israeli sentiment, to get along with other countries.

It would be easier to pretend that engaging in anti-Israeli rhetoric is being somehow even-handed, and to excuse it under the false pretence of being an honest broker.

Yes, it would be much easier for us to simply "go along to get along."

But as I have said frequently, Canada will not "go along to get along." Not under this Prime Minister's watch and most certainly not under my watch as Canada's Foreign Minister.

Canada upholds Israel's right to exist-as a Jewish state-in peace and security.

On this point, there is no space for moral equivocation or ambivalence. We are compelled as a country of free citizens to speak clearly.

We have the right, and therefore the obligation, to speak out and to act.

Canada will not accept the attempt to judge Israel by a different standard than any other state, we will not passively observe the effort to delegitimize and isolate it

within the international community, nor will we stay silent while the Jewish state is attacked for defending its territory or its people.

Canada stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel.

Israel is an inspiration.the only democracy in the region.

It is a leading innovator in so many fields, despite so many challenges.

It is a champion of civil rights in a region that far too often defines repression.

Simply put, Israel is worthy of our support because it is a society that shares so many values with Canada - freedom.democracy. human rights and the rule of law.

And I've seen this first-hand.

As some of you know, Tel Aviv is one of my favourite cities in the world. Every time I visit the city, I am always impressed with the beautiful harmony with which Jews of different backgrounds and different levels of observance live together.a city that co-exists as its official name - Tel Aviv-Jaffa - with an Arab minority. I recall one Friday afternoon standing in the junction where the Carmel Market and Sheinkin Street meet, watching the microcosm of Israel playing itself out: Jews and Arabs interacting in the market; young secular men putting on a Tefillin at Chabad booths, people who were free to love who they love without any fear of persecution. As I took this all in, it reaffirmed what I already knew: those who label Israel a racist state are simply wrong.

Earlier I talked about the phoenix-like rising of Israel. Of course, we can't talk about making something spectacular with nothing more than a vision, without talking about Tel Aviv and Meir Dizengoff.

He was a man with a bold vision to build a new Jewish city out of almost nothing - a city, I might add, that couldn't have been built without JNF funds.

Dizengoff and Tel Aviv symbolize the rebirth of the Jewish people in their historical homeland.

As a city that absorbed so many Jews who survived the Holocaust, Tel Aviv's founders built a city that became the financial and cultural centre of a nation reborn.

This is not merely a commercial place, but an emotional space, bearing a cosmopolitan presence mingled with pioneering memories.

Which gets us to the focus of this evening's celebration: the important role of the JNF. Its contributions to the State of Israel are deeply connected to its rebirth. The JNF is unparalleled in its work, both in the historical role it played in the creation of Israel, and in the role it continues to play in bettering the quality of life within Israel - for all rural and urban Israelis alike; Jewish, Arab and Christians alike.

I wouldn't know as much as I do about the work of the organization were it not for my personal friendship with national director - Josh Cooper - who has been a friend of mine for over a decade. I commend the leadership of JNF for having selected such a capable and dynamic individual to lead the organization in Canada.

I'll conclude by looking forward.

More than 60 years ago, Israel appeared as a light in a world emerging from darkness.

Against all odds - and despite concerted efforts by some - the light has not been extinguished.

It burns still.

And it burns ever brighter when upheld by the principles of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

There is room for more light in the world, especially as the darkness of swirling regional uncertainty threatens to close in.

Working together, we strengthen and affirm these important principles in word and deed.

And we declare our choice to use our freedoms and shared humanity for good.

May that light shine ever brighter.

Thank you.