



Canadians for Justice and Peace
in the Middle East
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December 3, 2020

Hon. Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
5th Floor, 438 University Ave.
Toronto, ON M5G 2K8

Also sent by email to stephen.lecce@pc.ola.org

Dear Hon. Stephen Lecce,

I am writing to you as Vice President of the Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME, www.cjpme.org), a national non-profit organization concerned with issues of justice, development and peace in the Middle East. I'm deeply concerned with how you have handled an educational video blog, produced by a student and included in a tenth-grade civics course, which features a Palestinian point of view. I am aware that you have banned school boards from showing this video, which you have described as "anti-Israel and antisemitic." This is an inaccurate description of the video's content, and an unacceptable way to treat Palestinian perspectives in the classroom.

I have reviewed the video blog in question, and while it does reflect a specifically Palestinian point of view, I did not find there to be any unacceptable or racist content. Instead, in the video the student discusses the "current occupation of the Palestinian land by the Zionists," who are said to have "violated the human rights of the Palestinians." This is not controversial:

- Zionism is the political ideology of the state of Israel. Merriam-Webster, for example, defines Zionism as "an international movement originally for the establishment of a Jewish national or religious community in Palestine and later for the support of modern Israel." A political movement launched in the 19th century, Zionism eventually led to the emigration of hundreds of thousands of (mostly European) Jews to Palestine through the mid-20th century. The use of the term "Zionist" in this context is entirely appropriate.
- It is the consensus within the international community that Israel is an occupying power over East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, known collectively as the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). It is also true that respected human rights organizations and international bodies regularly monitor human rights violations by Israel in the oPt. (You may wish to consult Amnesty International Canada's webpage which summarizes many of the human rights issues arising from Israel's 53-year military occupation of the Palestinian territories: <https://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/priority-countries/israel-and-occupied-palestinian-territories>).

Neither is the student's video "biased," as you suggest. In fact, the student includes a reference to "Gaza militants" who have "retaliated by firing rockets at Israel," a point which is not presented in a positive manner but highlights the violence caused by various actors. The student concludes the video by suggesting that the "government of Israel needs to be pressured into ending this occupation by people around the world whether they're civilians or politicians," which is a perfectly legitimate view of how civil society can play a role in ending the conflict.

While the student's views are not held by everyone, they are consistent with viewpoints expressed frequently within academia, international institutions, and human rights bodies. They are reflective of international law and official Canadian foreign policy. To describe the video in terms of "bias" and "misinformation" is entirely inaccurate.



CJPME

CANADIANS FOR JUSTICE AND
PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

It is appalling that the Government of Ontario has ruled this video to be illegitimate, which amounts to the effective censorship of Palestinian perspectives from the classroom. Your action is particularly inappropriate because the video appears to have been produced as an item for debate, to facilitate discussion and responses from other students. Banning such a video, particularly in the context of the exchange of different viewpoints, sends the message that Palestinians are not allowed to describe their own experiences of oppression, and that the Ontario School Board wishes to expunge the history of Palestinian suffering from Ontario schools.

This attempt at censorship must be rejected. CJPME urges Ontario to reverse this position and to allow school boards to use this video as part of a balanced discussion on the issue of human rights in Israel and Palestine. If you disagree with our call to end this ban, please provide a written justification in light of the information I provide above.

Sincerely,

Michael Bueckert, Vice President, CJPME

cc:

Marit Stiles, Official Opposition Critic for Education

Kathleen Wynne, Education Critic for the Liberal Party of Ontario

Mike Schreiner, Leader of the Green Party of Ontario

Sam Hammond, President of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO),

Harvey Bischof, President of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF)

Louise Sirisko, Director of Education, York Region District School Board

Camille Williams-Taylor, Director of Education, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board