

**Waiting on Time:  
Silence, Indifference, and Complicity  
in the Face of a Genocide in Gaza**

**Speech to the Ottawa Forum on Israel Palestine**

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Good evening. I'd like to thank the Ottawa Forum on Israel Palestine and Peter Larson in particular for the invitation to be part of this discussion. I am here rather than in the Senate, which is holding an unusual Monday evening sitting to deal with what the government has deemed "urgent" legislation related to internal trade, taxation, and major projects that are in the "national interest". We will likely be sitting late all this week and next until the "urgent" bills have been voted on.

But there is urgent, and then there is URGENT. In the scheme of things, it is hard to think of a more urgent crisis than the plight of Palestinians and the unfolding genocide that is taking place across Gaza and the West Bank. There is, unfortunately, zero possibility of the Canadian Government prioritizing legislation related to Palestine over the bills currently before Parliament, especially when a summer recess is only a few weeks away. But it is not as if the crisis in Palestine emerged last week. Following the horrific Hamas attack on Israeli civilians on 7 October 2023, the Israeli response has taken on more and more the character of a brutal and totalizing war on Gaza and on Palestinians. The warnings of such have been in place at least as early as the January 2024 International Court of Justice advisory that the genocide claims against Israel were "plausible".

That was 17 months ago. Since then, the evidence that a genocide is in fact taking place has mounted to the point where the overwhelming weight of international expert and legal opinion agrees.

I could point to many sources on this point, including our own Peggy Mason and the 500 or so Canadians who joined in a letter to the government organized by Alex Neve, but let me simply cite the President of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, Dr Melanie O'Brien, who confirms that the world is witnessing in Gaza "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, (including) killing or imposing conditions meant to bring about physical destruction" – that is to say, the legal definition of genocide.

Many defenders of Israel are fond of pointing out that the ICJ did not affirm a genocide was taking place in Gaza, but only that the claims against Israel were "plausible". They usually neglect to mention that the same statement from the ICJ "ordered" Israel to take measures to prevent genocidal acts and incitement to genocide, and to ensure humanitarian aid reaches Gaza. Even if the Government of Canada was unpersuaded about genocide in January 2024, the proper course of action would have been to act on the warning that a genocide could unfold and that there was a responsibility to prevent that from happening. Instead, we defended Israel's military actions in Gaza, accepted its claims about humanitarian aid going into the territory, and in so doing, watched from the sidelines a genocide that unfolded before our very eyes. In the memorable but chilling words of Amnesty International, this was a "livestreamed genocide", to which no government can claim to not have known about. I think the question that Canadians

must face up to eventually is whether our government not only watched the livestream as passive viewers, but in fact aided and abetted the genocide through our actions, such as statements of support for Israel, arms sales, suppression of Palestinian voices in Canada, votes in the UN, and so on.

The issue of complicity therefore looms large for Canada and, if nothing else, should motivate the government to make a major course correction in its position on the Gaza conflict, Canada-Israel relations, and the Palestine question more broadly. It is sad that it would take the fear of complicity in crimes against humanity to motivate a change in Canadian policy, rather than compassion for Palestinians and a commitment to international law, but such is the state of Canadian politics and our fealty to the status quo in international relations that we have found ourselves in a Faustian bargain.

It gets worse. I worry that “realist” politicians and their cynical advisors will not only resist a change in policy but also double down on rejecting the accusation of genocide against Israel in the belief that a denouement for Palestine is not far off, and that a victorious Israel, supported by the United States and opportunistic Arab neighbours, will divert the attention on war crimes to focus more on a “positive” agenda of “relocation” of Palestinians and the “reconstruction” of a devastated Gaza that has robbed Palestinians of their right to an independent homeland. All of you know the cruel aphorism about how history is written by the victors. In many ways, that saying sums up the conventional history of Israel-Palestine relations going back to the arrival of Zionists to Palestine at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is a history that privileges Zionist views of what amounts to a history of settler colonialism in Palestine that was made possible by the patronage of

first the UK and then the United States, and which persists to this day. It is what the UN Secretary General meant when he said, even as he condemned the 17 October Hamas attack on Israel, that there was a “context” to the attack. Most of our political class only knows the Zionist version of that history, which partly explains why they reflexively use buzz phrases like Israel’s “right to self-defense”, the goal of a “two-state solution”, the ever-present “risk of antisemitism”, and the need to “combat Palestinian terrorism”.

But that is not the only reason for the strongly pro-Zionist positions of our political class, which goes back at least to the 1947 vote on UN resolution 181 on the partition of Palestine. In a forthcoming article for *International Journal*, Dr John Price describes how the pioneering diplomat Elizabeth MacCallum was part of the Canadian UN delegation and led the fight to stop Lester Pearson from pushing through Resolution 181. Dr Price is correct in saying that “Canada’s responsibility for the ensuing devastation and trauma demands our attention”. Here again, ironically, any awareness of possible complicity and responsibility by Canada may, sadly, work against official acknowledgement of such and reinforce the instinct to press in the opposite direction.

Not all politicians are in thrall to Zionist narratives and unable to see the horror of a “livestreamed genocide” in Gaza. Some have spoken out fiercely. I am thinking of Salma Zahid, Heather MacPherson, Mario Beaulieu, Elizabeth May, and the newly elected Palestinian Canadian MP, Fares Al-Soud, to name a few. In the Senate, I have been joined by Marilou McPhedran, Kim Pate, and Rosa Galvez in issuing a public

statement on Gaza, and just last week more than 20 senators attended a briefing on the plight of children in the Ukraine and Gaza, organized by Save the Children.

Whether we are talking about the House of Commons or the Senate, the number of parliamentarians who have been public about their concern over Palestine is very small compared to overall numbers. To the extent that the views of parliamentarians reflect the Canadian population, one might expect that about 50 percent of MPs and Senators agree that a genocide is happening in Gaza. That would accord with the 49 percent of Canadians who hold that view, according to a recent poll by Leger. Even among Conservative voters, the poll suggests that 37 percent believe Israel is committing a genocide. Why then the very limited noise coming from Parliament Hill?

Bear in mind we are talking about what is described as the “crime of crimes”, not some everyday infraction of international law.

Parliamentarians are never short of breath in warning about genocide in other places (think Ukraine and Xinjiang), and certainly not when it comes to remembering the atrocity that gave us the very concept of genocide, which is of course the Holocaust.

But here’s the rub: It is precisely that Canadians so revere the remembrance of the Holocaust that we inhibit ourselves from invoking the memory of that genocide against a state that was established in the wake of its horror. The historian Enzo Traverso details brilliantly in his book “Gaza Faces History” how memorializing the Holocaust became a sort of

“civil religion” that honored human rights and the values of Western liberal democracies after the Second World War. In an interview, he said:

“The memory of the Holocaust experienced a paradoxical metamorphosis, and it was weaponized by Israel and by most Western powers in order to become a policy of an unconditional support of Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.”

He goes on to say: “I was shocked by the way in which many words, many concepts had been abused and misunderstood. Now we are facing a paradoxical situation in which the perpetrator is Hamas and the Palestinians, and the victims are the Israelis. And this is a reversal of reality. And this has extremely dangerous consequences, because today we are facing a dramatic, a tragic situation in which the memory of the Holocaust is invoked and claimed to justify a war in Gaza which is taking genocidal features. And this means that the memory of the Holocaust is completely perverted.”

Which is where we are today in Canada. Outside of the United States and Germany, the way in which this distortion of reality has captured the political class and establishment leaders, is perhaps stronger and more pernicious here than in most other western democracies. It partly explains why there has been so little protest coming from MPs and senators; why the Gaza crisis did not become more of an election issue; why there is so little coverage of genocidal acts in Gaza by Canadian media; why the government has been so supportive of Israel through much of the last 18 months; why the turn towards a more critical stance has been so gradual and tepid; and why, as we learned today, that the class valedictorian of Bell High School in Ottawa

was sanctioned just because she acknowledged the deaths of 17,000 children in her speech to the graduating class.

In fact, the Government of Canada has endorsed the very problem Dr Traverso describes. The so-called *Canadian Handbook on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism* specifically identifies what it calls “Holocaust Inversion” as an example of antisemitism. Here is what the Handbook says:

“In this form of antisemitic discrimination, Israel and Jews are now portrayed as Nazi-like perpetrators of mass atrocities and genocide. Among other inspirations, Holocaust inversion has origins in Soviet-era propaganda and Soviet anti-Zionism. These comparisons often form a cycle of positive reinforcement with Holocaust denial and minimization. They are especially harmful due to the intergenerational trauma from the Holocaust that many Jewish people carry”.

This definition of holocaust inversion is illogical and disingenuous. I agree that Holocaust denial and minimization are abominable and that portrayals of Jews as Nazis are hurtful and unacceptable. But the question of mass atrocities, war crimes, and genocide is distinct from how Jews are portrayed. These questions can only be answered empirically and through the lens of international law. And they are applied not to Jewish people as such, but to the state of Israel, which is of course *subject* to international law. The fact that Israel defines itself as a Jewish state is an awkward fact that connects any mass atrocities by the state to its Jewish identity. That is a problem of Israel’s own creation, and not a slander on the part of those

who accuse Israel of genocide, much less an example of antisemitism. And yet, defenders of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, including Deborah Lyons, Canada's Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combatting Antisemitism, use Holocaust Inversion to shield Israel from accusations of serious war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Even if you don't think the threshold of genocide has been met in the case of Gaza, the simple question is this: Is the State of Israel exempt from the possibility of genocidal acts? Does it have a forever "get out of jail" card? Does any country have a "get out of jail" card?

I understand the difficulty that many of us have in coming to terms with the idea that a Semitic people who suffered unspeakable horror at the hands of Nazis could now be inflicting another kind of unspeakable horror against Palestinians, who, by the way, are also Semitic peoples. The historian Timothy Garton Ash had this reflection to offer: "Ever since I started studying the history of Nazi Germany some 50 years ago, the Holocaust has been central to the way I think not just about Europe, and what we are trying to do on our own continent, but also about how Europeans should speak and act in the world. If I'm honest, I hate to think, and even in my heart of hearts find it difficult to accept, that a Jewish state can behave in this way".

Here is an example of the twisted logic of the IHRA working definition: In October 2024, the Canadian government refused to meet with Francesca Albanese, the brilliant and fearless UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Palestine, when she was in Ottawa. The official

excuse is that she is anti-Semitic, indeed that she was guilty of “Holocaust Inversion”. And what did she say to deserve this slur? That Germans and Italians should be at the forefront of the opposition to the assault on Gaza. And that our collective obliviousness to what led, 100 years ago, to the Third Reich's genocide of people not in conformity with a pure race is leading to the commission of yet another genocide. I am paraphrasing Special Rapporteur Albanese’s remarks, but these are the ideas that our government has deemed *verboden*, based on its own working definition of antisemitism.

The problem of Holocaust Inversion is the opposite of what the IHRA definition claims. Here again, is Enzo Traverso:

“Those who are protesting against this genocidal war are accused of antisemitism. But if the memory of the Holocaust is mobilized to defend unconditionally a genocidal policy, maybe people could think that the memory of the Holocaust is intrinsically bad. If criticizing a genocide is antisemitism, many people would think that antisemitism is not so bad. And finally, many people would start thinking that the Holocaust itself is a myth invented by Israel in order to justify its politics of occupation of the Palestinian territories and of oppression. So, I fear, I worry that in the long view, maybe not immediately, but people who are claiming an unconditional defense of Israeli occupation and war in the name of the struggle against antisemitism and in the name of the memory of the Holocaust are preparing a new wave of antisemitism”.

Let me be clear. We cannot and should not come up with excuses for antisemitism and must always be vigilant against its manifestation in society. But false claims of antisemitism can be as damaging as antisemitism itself because of the corrosive effects on public sentiment that Dr Traverso describes. And we are in a world today where antisemitism is used as a bludgeon against critics of Israel and as a conversation stopper for serious debate on issues related to arms exports, sanctions, support for humanitarian assistance to Gaza, anti-Palestinian racism, and the recognition of Palestinian statehood. South of the border, antisemitism has been cited as the reason for, among other things, defunding government programs, deporting immigrants, curbing the number of foreign students coming the United States, and punishing faculty and students because of their views. We may be smug about how Canada has resisted the populist and authoritarian turn of our powerful neighbour, but on the issue of Palestine and Israel, we are closer to the US than we think.

Which gets to what most Canadians today think of as the existential crisis facing the country: How to not end up at the 51<sup>st</sup> state of the USA. I do not doubt the determination of Prime Minister Carney to resist American designs on our country and I am confident that he and his cabinet will do whatever they can to protect our independence as well as our access to the American market. One of the biggest tests of our independence, however, will be on foreign policy, including the issue of Palestine, where the United States has already marked its disapproval over Canada's very modest tilt towards a more critical stance of Israel. It may well be that our appetite for a more robust stand against Israel is stifled by concern for the impact that it would have on relations with the United States. A prime example would be

our arms exports to Israel via the United States that are protected by a bilateral agreement with the Americans. We are likely to face other sources of US pressure that seek to link bilateral issues with Washington to our position on issues in Palestine and the Middle East more broadly. Given the economic stakes and the power of the Israel lobby in Canada and the United States, the temptation to succumb to these pressures will be great. But they must be weighed against our longstanding rhetorical commitment to the rule of law and our reputation as a fair minded and principled player on the world stage. After all, Mr Carney has said that if the United States doesn't want to be a leader in the world, Canada is willing to "step up".

As stirring as the Prime Minister's comments may be, Canada's ability to "step up" on global issues will be tested by how we manage the Palestine issue in the months and years ahead. As it is, Canada is seen by most of the world as being in thrall to US and Israel interests and a laggard on support for Palestinians as well as on issues such as the recognition of the State of Palestine. It is compounded by a glaring double-standard in the way which Ottawa has responded to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine compared to our response to the war on Gaza. By every measure of war misery in the two conflicts, Canada's response has been lopsided and impossible to defend.

It does not help that there is a perception Canada is more sympathetic to the suffering of fair-skinned Christian Europeans than it is to brown-skinned Muslim Arabs (even though not all Palestinians are Muslims). I have met with diplomats who tell me that they will no longer sit patiently while

Canadian officials lecture them on human rights issues, when Ottawa is possibly complicit in the wholesale destruction of Gaza, never mind protecting the human rights of Palestinians. Double standards in foreign policy is of course nothing new. Josep Borrell, the former EU high representative for foreign and security policy, joked in his 2024 Dahrendorf Lecture at the European Studies Centre in Oxford that he used to tell his ambassadors: “Diplomacy is the art of managing double standards”. But he was dead serious when he explained how damaging it was to Europe's international credibility that there is a perception “we value civilian lives in Ukraine more than we do in Gaza”. He went on to say: 'If we call something a war crime in one place, we need to call it by the same name in any other’.

This kind of hypocrisy perhaps did not matter as much when Canada and other G7 members were so much more dominant relative to other countries and we could get away with the arcane diplomat art of defending foreign policy double standards. In a more multipolar world, however, countries of the “Global South” will be less willing to accept the doublespeak of western diplomacy and the selective application of international law, especially when the Russia-Ukraine war is juxtaposed so starkly with Israel-Palestine. You can be sure that they will be skeptical about the ideas and initiatives of any country that seeks to “step up” to fill a void occupied by the United States in a way that simply mimics the United States. Even if we do not suffer international legal consequences from our failure to act against an unfolding genocide in Palestine, our international stature will be diminished and any moral authority that we had on human rights issues in other parts of the world will be undermined.

Let me close with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr, who wrote in *A Testament of Hope*:

*“It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, ‘Wait on time’.”*

My friends, the clock is ticking for Palestinians in Gaza. We can no longer “wait on time”.

Thank you.