

Libby Davies, Israel, Spin and Chill

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Thursday, June 17, 2010

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Hot on the heels of "[The Thing About Israel](#)" from the other day, I see a campaign against Libby Davies because of a video of her comments at a rally and the spin around it.

Today I despin and respin aspects of the event.

1. I found out about the [Libby Davies YouTube video](#) the other night when someone called AnonymousProgressive emailed their link to me with a "wtf?". The video was part of that person's YouTube account. The video seems to be a re-edit of a video by katzd314, with a link to [this blog piece](#). I emailed a second time to AnonymousProgressive [AnonymousProgressive@gmail.com] asking for their background in relation to the video and why they're anonymous.
2. People often comment anonymously about Israel for many reasons including because they are afraid of vitriolic retribution and a myriad of other things, whether their fear is credible or not. This is the chill atmosphere that pervades dialogue about Israel, and many other highly controversial topics. Other times, people are anonymous because they're up to no good. It's hard to say for sure here, but so far it looks like entrapment/gotcha journalism, blogger style. There are lots of opinions about how legitimate/useful that is. Regarding the real intentions of the poster, I still haven't received a reply to AnonymousProgressive's anonymity. I'll send them this piece to see if they wish to comment, anonymously or openly.
3. Let's respin the video:
 1. The first question asked of Davies from the questioner is when did the "occupation in Israel" start, 1948 or 1967? Davies answers 1948. [She stated that was an error here](#) and apologized for any confusion that caused. Many actually wouldn't see her 1948 answer as an error though.
 2. AnonymousProgressive then intersperses a defense that stating 1948 necessarily denies Israel's right to exist. It might be a bit of a leap to say that stating that the occupation began in 1948 means a belief Israel should not exist. The UN Security Council is seen by many, like me, as far from a democratically legitimate body. The UN General Assembly's votes are non-binding, while the 5 permanent members of the Security Council have vetoes on Security Council resolutions, which are binding. The creation of Israel has been under a cloud of illegitimacy since before 1948. Was there a [forced expulsion of Palestinians](#), for instance? I think the same can be said for the settlement, creation and growth of Canada. At the same time, many people see no illegitimacy at all in the UN's actions regarding Israel, or indeed Canada's origins.
 3. Judy Rebick [describes it far better here](#): *"It is a matter of debate whether the occupation started in 1948 or 1967. If you are of the view that the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homes when Israel was founded was unacceptable than [sic] the occupation began there. If you agree with the foundation of state of Israel whatever the costs to the Palestinian people then you think the occupation started in 1967. Believing that the foundation of the state of Israel was unjust does not mean that you think the state of Israel*

should not continue to exist. I believe that the foundation of Canada was unjust but I don't call for the dissolution of Canada; although I am starting to consider it." I happen to think that since about 96% of BC is on unceded First Nations land, we are in a similar place of occupation. Look up the [Royal Proclamation of 1763](#) on that one.

4. Davies then explained that in Gaza, people are suffering and that you can't get basic necessities there. AnonymousProgressive inserted a statement from a Hamas official saying that because of bread, there is no starvation in Gaza. That may be true. But there are other necessities than bread and other ways to suffer. The International Red Cross released an unusually bold statement on Monday [calling for an end to the illegal closure of Gaza](#). They explain suffering circumstances beyond just the presence/absence of bread.
5. The next question in the video is whether she supports the Boycott, Divest, Sanction [BDS] campaign against Israel. The textual commentary explains she is wrong, which is logically absurd because the question was whether she supports the BDS campaign. Her opinion is her opinion. An example of an unhelpful merging of fact/opinion/vitriol that muddies clear discourse. The textual commentary explains that BDS targets all Israelis "to isolate and delegitimize the Jewish state." That could be one goal of many who support BDS. I remember a [Boycott Brand America](#) campaign several years ago. Many who supported it wanted to delegitimize the USA, many simply wanted President Bush to get out of Iraq: a political policy choice. Do all who support BDS necessarily wish to delegitimize the Jewish state? No. To say they all do is unprovable and a bullying tactic because it puts a chill on discourse.

In the end, what comes from all this? Some discussion, some facts, some opinions, a mis-stated year, an apology, some analogies, and some unfounded logical leaps. This seems to be standard in my observation of dialogue about Israel over the last quarter century.

So then other Canadian federal politicians start condemning Libby Davies for her views. Again, [Judy Rebick notes](#) that the vast majority of Canadians do not have a positive view of Israel and just over half have a negative view. So who is offended by criticism of Israel?

I won't put on my tin foil hat and try to list them all. But here's the answer: those who have a stake in supporting the status quo. That includes Canada, Israel's "[best friend](#)," regardless of whether that's a Conservative or Liberal government in Canada.

But we learn more when we see Murray Dobbins' accounting of [how Jack Layton reacted to Davies' comments](#), apologizing to the Israeli ambassador and forcing her to make a public apology. This perpetuates the chill that there is something untouchable about talking about Israel...to the point of avoiding commentary on Israel's killing of flotilla travelers in international waters; how is that not an international crime?

Virtually the same thing happened the week after BC NDP candidate Mable Elmore won her nomination in Vancouver-Kensington in March 2009. Using the word Zionist in an interview she gave years earlier [came back into the public eye](#). BC NDP leader Carole James [forced Elmore to apologize](#).

And if you've heard of the hitherto great journalist Helen Thomas, you can read two perspectives about the price she paid for [carelessly weighing in on issues around Israel](#), along with [a defense of her](#). Clearly,

the stakes are high for engaging about Israel.

There is clearly a minefield around Israel discourse. There are inferences, presumed implications, assumed emotions, leaps to conclusions, fear of bad political spin, confusion around who exactly are politicians' constituents, fear of perhaps offending a group regardless of how logical or reasonable it may be.

All these add up to a chill. A chill that I have felt victim to if you look at [the very little I have written in 6 years about Israel](#), out of a reluctance to deal with the [at least chill-induced perceived] onslaught of opposition. That is, until recent weeks when the absence of political action in the world to address human rights violations motivated a flotilla of civilians with aid to attempt to break a blockade that [violates "international humanitarian law"](#). Then the *Rachel Corrie* was kept from landing in Gaza.

Now there is a [ship of German Jews readying to sail to Gaza](#). This should help cut the Gordian knot of simplistic manipulation and intellectual abuse that is the all-spin zone around Israeli issues and the machinery of the chill over so many who should feel free to speak their minds.

And here's your test for today. Take a look at [this classic editorial cartoon](#) and see if you can engage with it on rational, emotional and political levels without sliding into a reactionary place. You are, of course, free to like or dislike, respect or oppose it

And a final test, if you are still unsure of whether Zionism is a necessarily offensive word in North America, [read its use and context here](#) and try to separate the definition and use of "Zionism" and the writer's opinions about Zionism. This should clear/muddle things up for various people. How about you?

Finally, I intentionally waited until I finished writing this before reading most of [this piece by Paul Burrows](#) to avoid restating everything that resonates with me.

So, I want to live in a community where we have open dialogue about controversial issues. When events are spun and a chill sets in, we all suffer from this. I think our job is to not settle for simplistic answers and to be critical of the spin and "follow the money" to see who benefits from each position on the table.

The truth wants to be free. We all need to practice how to hear it and cut through the impediments.