

## **JSA/Hillel executive no longer sees IAW as a free speech issue, now he wants it banned on campus**

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Written by Rebeca Kuropatwa

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WINNIPEG – Spencer Fernando, a second-year University of Manitoba (U of M) political science student and member of the JSA/Hillel executive, is not Jewish but is a self-described “Israel supporter.”

In early March of this year, he was one of the ‘voices of reason’ speaking out about the province’s first-ever Israel Apartheid Week (IAW), which was held at the university in early March.

IAW is sponsored by ActLeft (a university student group), the Canada-Palestine Support Network (CanPalNet) and Independent Jewish Voices (IJV).

Before IAW began, Fernando believed an explosive reaction to IAW would have been misguided, noting, “That’s just what the IAW people want – protests, yelling, and screaming. If we fall into that, we’re just as bad as them. We must remain calm and represent a positive image of Israel so people will see a bunch of people screaming about Apartheid on one side [IAW], and on the other, people speaking positively.

“Some are so driven by their ideas that if you try to stop them from speaking their minds, you’ll only fuel their anger. We must focus on getting our message across to those more open, fair-minded people. We’re all human beings with a right to our opinions, but we don’t have a right to demonize and viciously attack one group.

“We must create a dialogue. Without speaking to those we disagree with, it’s easy to create a caricature of who we think they are. But when you talk to them, you’ll find we all want the same basic things...and then there’s hope for more rational discussion.”

However, after having experienced IAW first-hand, Fernando is now seeing things quite differently. Today, he feels that the only reasonable approach in this situation is to have an outright ban – ideally backed by the university administration and the provincial government – of IAW on campus.

“Originally, I felt it best to let IAW take place on campus as I thought it was an issue of freedom of speech, and I thought if we didn’t let IAW take place it might just intensify things,” he said.

During IAW, Fernando was shocked to hear IAW supporters saying Israel has no right to exist.

“This flies in the face of what our country is all about and what universities stand for. Canada is the single best country in the world in terms of tolerance and acceptance, but

that's something that we must constantly work to maintain – advocating for and not taking for granted our freedoms...or we risk losing them.

“Israel is a lot like Canada. They fight our shared fight for democracy and freedom. The least we can do is support them with words.”

Back in Grade 9, Fernando participated in the Asper Holocaust program and learned much, including how the Holocaust started. “Now, similar things are happening – people are first deligitimizing Israel, then Jews and then everyone,” he said.

“When you deligitimize people, you cross the line from free speech to hate speech. One of my Jewish friends was afraid to even go to the university during IAW.”

On April 15, provincial politicians haggled over whether the local government should denounce IAW when PC?Tuxedo MLA Heather Stefanson brought forward a Private Members Resolution calling on the caucus to condemn IAW in Manitoba.

Stefanson said, “We have zero tolerance for any event that promotes the harassment and intimidation of Jewish students,” noting a similar resolution was put forward by Ontario PC MPP Peter Shurman.

“When Shurman’s resolution passed unanimously in Ontario, IAW was happening on campuses across the country,” said Stefanson. “I felt very strongly that he was doing the right thing.... MLAs of all political stripes need to band together to eradicate this display of racism and divisiveness. Such activities should simply not be accepted in Manitoba.”

Stefanson’s resolution was shut down twice by the NDP. She was shocked by the caucus reaction, noting that “the NDP refused to take a stand on this issue by not allowing this resolution to come to a vote...[and] now it can’t be brought back unless the NDP agrees to do so.”

Fernando is disappointed with the NDP for “voting against Heather Stefanson’s motion to stop IAW. To me, this means that either many people in the NDP government don’t support Israel or they just have no idea what hate they’re unleashing on our campuses. “At least our federal government is a strong supporter of Israel. A change in the provincial government would be key in getting IAW banned.”

One way Fernando and other students are working to be part of the solution is by starting an annual Middle East Peace Week on campus.

“This will show people the bigger picture – that people in Israel want peace and that Israel does most things right,” said Fernando. “We’re talking about a country that takes up only two per cent of the Middle East, yet it’s always demonized. Imagine if Canada – our family, our friends – was being targetted with rocket attacks. Would we then really be calling for restraint and calm as the world is now demanding of Israel? Israel is more than restrained in its responses.”

Fernando has no doubt that unless the provincial government and/or campus administration step forward, IAW will return next year with a vengeance.

“Organizers of the first IAW successfully spread much incorrect, anti-Israel information.

“Those IAW supporters I tried to discuss the issues with have remained stuck to their misinformed views, covering up antisemitism with anti-Israel posturing. The next IAW will be even worse.”

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