

Palestine ‘a Crappy Piece of Land’ Claim Sparks Outrage

The resignation of a provincial minister in Canada over anti-Palestinian comments marks a victory for the Palestine solidarity movement, reports John Clarke

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Global Research, February 12, 2024

[Counterfire](#) 7 February 2024

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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The social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) of British Columbia has been buffeted by a political storm that was unleashed by the comments of its post-secondary education minister, Selina Robinson. She publicly and brazenly asserted that, prior to the creation of Israel, Palestine had been nothing more than a ‘crappy piece of land’.

Despite Robinson’s attempts to backtrack and the party leadership’s efforts at damage control, the outrage that her deeply racist comments generated was so powerful and sustained that she has now been forced out of the cabinet.

On 5 February, Premier David Eby finally bowed to the inevitable and announced that following ‘discussions with Minister Robinson we have reached a challenging and necessary decision that Selina will be stepping down in her role as [advanced education minister](#).’

To appreciate the importance of this development, it is first necessary to understand the role of Robinson in promoting anti-Palestinian racism and undermining Palestine solidarity. Her comments on 30 January were delivered at a gathering that was organised by the hardline Zionist body, B’nai B’rith Canada and they were posted on YouTube.

Robinson suggested that critics of Israel were ill informed on the supposed realities of what existed before the 1948 Nakba. As she put it, they ‘don’t understand that it was a crappy piece of land with nothing on it. You know, there were several hundred thousand people but

other than that, it didn't produce an economy.'

Terra Nullius

With these appalling comments, Robinson advanced the infamous notion of terra nullius, that was employed by colonising powers, including those in Canada, to claim that Indigenous populations were too primitive and economically undeveloped to retain possession of their land. The brazen crudity of these remarks immediately generated outrage in a number of communities. There were immediate and continuing calls for her to resign or be removed from her position in the government.

Laith Sarhan, a Vancouver-based Palestinian Canadian lawyer and activist, challenged Robinson's false historical view and called for her to be removed from the provincial cabinet. This was echoed by, among others, Independent Jewish Voices Canada, Indigenous leaders, and federal NDP MP Matthew Green.

It was immediately apparent to Robinson and her government colleagues that she had gone too far and measures of damage control were set in motion. She declared that,

'I understand that this flippant comment has caused pain and that it diminishes the connection Palestinians also have to the land.'

However, she didn't acknowledge the racist and thoroughly colonialist nature of her words, but instead suggested that she had chosen them incautiously:

'I said awful things. It came out not the way I intended. I was sloppy with my storytelling,' she said.

For his part, Premier David Eby offered the view that her 'comments increase divisions in our province. They increase the feelings of alienation of groups of people, especially people of Palestinian descent and people who are concerned about the death and the destruction in Palestine that is happening right now.'

Eby added that, 'She has apologized unequivocally, as she should. And she's got some more work to do', and he stressed that she will now be 'reaching out to communities to repair the damage her [remarks caused](#).' Clearly Eby hoped that admitting serious failings, while stressing Robinson's readiness to mend her ways, would be enough to weather the storm without the loss of his minister.

There were, however, some glaring problems with this display of concern and contrition. Robinson's remarks carried a very clear and deliberate message that can't be explained away as some careless turn of phrase. Moreover, what she had to say on 30 January was not an isolated incident.

As Robinson dealt with the reaction to her ugly views, another example of her pro-Israel approach was coming home to roost. The Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC and the Canadian Association of University Teachers released a letter on 1 February that also called on Eby to remove Robinson from his cabinet. This was over her intervention in the case of Natalie Knight, who had been an instructor at Langara College in Vancouver.

Last October, Knight addressed a rally in Vancouver in which she referred to 'the amazing,

brilliant offensive waged on Oct. 7' by Hamas and other organisations, in which they broke out of Gaza. Langara launched an investigation into her conduct and she was placed on leave. However, this led to the conclusion that the words she had spoken 'were not clearly outside the bounds of protected expression' and she was reinstated.

At this point, Robinson used her ministerial position to intervene and ensure that Knight would lose her job. On 26 January, Langara announced that Knight was no longer employed by them, and this reversal took place one day after Robinson had taken to social media to declare that she was 'disappointed that this instructor continues to have a public post-secondary platform to spew hatred and vitriol.' She also made clear that she had met with the college leadership to drive home her views.

Michael Conlon, executive director of the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC, responded to Robinson's actions by noting that the 'notion that a minister would intervene directly with a college and call for the termination of a tenured faculty member is highly inappropriate and unprecedented. We will assist the Langara Faculty Association in grieving [this unjustified termination.](#)'

Popular Anger

From the record of Robinson's social-media activity, her support for anti-Palestinian and Islamophobic perspectives became clear, as did her readiness to slander those taking to the streets to demand a ceasefire in Gaza. Thousands of people put their names to a letter to David Eby that asserted that a 'member of your cabinet, Selina Robinson, has continually repeated Islamophobic stereotypes, vilified Muslims, Arabs and Palestinians. She has spread misinformation by aligning herself with the IDF and right-wing [media like Fox News.](#)'

On 4 February, it was reported that 'representatives from more than a dozen B.C. mosques and Islamic associations have sent a letter to Premier David Eby calling for the minister of post-secondary education to be removed from her role. They also say no NDP MLA or candidate for the next election is welcome in their sacred spaces until the premier takes action [against Selina Robinson.](#)'

With this growing level of popular anger at work, the effort to protect Robinson was clearly falling short. Having already issued dubious apologies, she now promised, rather desperately, to take 'anti-Islamophobia training', again assuring everyone that, 'I am committed to making amends, learning from the pain I have caused and doing whatever I can [to rebuild relationships.](#)' None of this was working, however, and later that day she no longer had a place at the cabinet table.

Robinson's misfortunes lay in the jarring fashion in which she justified Israel's colonial project, but she was by no means an entirely discordant note in the government of which she was a part. Last November, with the slaughter in Gaza underway, the BC NDP's annual convention passed a resolution calling for a ceasefire but the motion was added to the agenda belatedly, in the face of a Palestine solidarity protest outside the building.

The emergency resolution was opposed by some who considered it inadequate and David Eby wouldn't associate himself with the demand for a ceasefire, claiming that 'he wants peace in the Middle East, but his responsibility as premier is to the people of B.C. and addressing the rise in hate seen here [since the Oct. 7 attack.](#)' From all this, it isn't hard to appreciate that the leadership of the BC government was ready to tolerate someone like

Robinson until she provoked a level of outrage that made her a liability.

Robinson's political downfall is a welcome development at a critical time for the Palestinian struggle and the movement of solidarity with it. Canada has seen the weaponisation of anti-Semitism and an ongoing effort to intimidate those who speak out or take to the streets against Israel's brutality.

Since the genocidal assault on Gaza got underway, the movement of solidarity with Palestine has grown in strength and confidence. In the face of [efforts to criminalise it](#), it has continued to mobilise and defy attempts to stifle it. It is an indication of the new power and resilience of this movement that anti-Palestinian racism could be challenged so effectively and that Selina Robinson held accountable as she so richly deserved to be.

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John Clarke became an organiser with the [Ontario Coalition Against Poverty](#) when it was formed in 1990 and has been involved in mobilising poor communities under attack ever since.

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