Ottawa
May 20, 2005

Ronald J. Saba
Editor
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Dear Ronald J. Saba and readers of the Montreal Planet Magazine,

Thank you for your e-mail, dated April 11th in response to my election as Chair of the all-party, non-partisan Canada-Israel Interparliamentary (Friendship) Group. This is an official Friendship Group of the House of Commons which strives to better bilateral relations with the State of Israel, especially with our counterparts in the Israel-Canada Friendship Group in the Knesset (Israel's parliament).

I think that your letter indirectly affirms and highlights the importance of this parliamentary group. It is sad that much of the discourse around Israel and the Middle East Peace Process is politicized and characterized by partisan rhetoric that selectively highlights convenient sources. Indeed your letter is a good example of this partisan exercise.

Your letter's discussion of Israel seems based on an op-ed piece by an Israeli politician. I wonder whether you would give the same credence to a quote by a member of the Palestinian Authority, who might have called for the destruction of Israel, or the running of Jews into the sea, or the raising of a million suicide bombers to destroy the Jewish presence in the Holy Land, at one time?

In truth, both sides have people whose commentary, if taken as the general position of a government or a side, would be highly inaccurate, unrepresentative and misleading. Indeed, it is Israel's strength as a thriving democracy that allows Israelis to disagree publicly and vehemently with their government, generating sensational quotes like the one that you have referenced.

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Israel is not an apartheid state – repeating it does not make it so. A million Israeli Arabs vote in Israel in free elections – something that Arabs do not enjoy anywhere in the Middle East, excepting now in Iraq. An independent judiciary in Israel holds the Israeli government to account. In fact, it was the Israeli Supreme Court that forced the Israeli government to change the course of its security barrier to minimize hardships on the Palestinians. An Israeli high court that places Palestinian human rights over Israeli government plans is something truly noteworthy.

Your select quote and constant references to apartheid portrays the Jewish presence in the Holy Land as a colonial presence. Perhaps you are not aware that the Jewish connection to this land is thousands of years old. Maybe you are not aware that throughout the centuries (not merely in the 20th century), Jews lived and worked there. The differences between apartheid South Africa and Israel are enormous and the comparison is baseless and partisan.

If you are looking to play a constructive role in the public discourse over the Middle East Peace Process, I recommend that you study the facts, know realities on the ground and the history of the region, and support the implementation by both sides of the Quartet's Performance-based Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East.

First phase of the Roadmap calls on Israel to freeze settlement activities and dismantle illegal settlements. The Gaza withdrawal plan (set for August) is an important step in that direction and should be commended. The first phase of the Roadmap calls on the Palestinians to stem terrorist attacks against Israel and dismantle terrorist groups, such as Hamas and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. The new Palestinian leadership has taken steps to achieve a cease fire and it should be commended for that first step.

Charging the debate with biased rhetoric at this juncture is not helpful to anyone – neither Israelis nor Palestinians. Only a meaningful negotiated settlement between the two sides would grant Israel security that it needs and offer Palestinians an independent state that they deserve.

I hope that your readers would have an opportunity to read my rebuttal to your letter.

Sincerely,

Hon. Marlene Jennings, M.P.
Notre-Dame-de-Grâce
Chair of the Canada-Israel Interparliamentary Group