

**Middle  
East  
Studies  
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of North America, Inc.

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January 11, 2011

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Peter Shurman, MPP  
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The Honourable Eric Hoskins, MPP  
Minister of Citizenship and Immigration  
Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration  
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Toronto, Ontario M7A 2R9  
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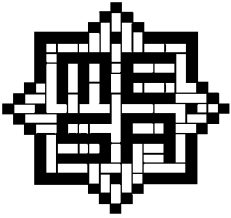
The Honourable Steve Peters, MPP  
Speaker of the Ontario Legislative Assembly  
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Toronto, Ontario M7A 1A2  
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Dear Sirs,

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, I am writing to express our dismay at recent remarks by two members of Ontario's Legislative Assembly, and by Ontario's Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, with regard to the contents of a thesis accepted by a master's program at the University of Toronto. These assertions inappropriately conflate criticism of Zionism and Israel with anti-Semitism. They also evince a disregard for the principles of academic freedom and threaten the autonomy of Canadian universities.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

At the Ontario Legislative Assembly's session of December 7, 2010, MPP Steve Clark stated that "Jewish groups are criticizing the University of Toronto for accepting a shockingly anti-Semitic master's thesis" and asked Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Eric Hoskins what he was doing "to stop the rising tide of anti-Semitism." MPP Clark thereby clearly accepted the characterization of the thesis in question – written by Jennifer Peto, who received her master's degree from the Sociology and Equity Studies in Education program of the University of Toronto's School of Graduate Studies – as anti-Semitic, though from



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his remarks it does not seem that he had actually read it. In the exchange that ensued both Minister Hoskins and another MPP, Peter Shurman, also seem to have accepted without question the characterization of this master's thesis as anti-Semitic.

We are distressed that parliamentarians seem willing to make vague and potentially damaging allegations on the floor of a legislative body, apparently relying not on a reading of the text in question but rather on media reports and claims by organizations based outside academia. Ms. Peto's thesis certainly includes strong criticisms of Zionism and of Israel, and of course one may agree or disagree with her assertions, arguments and analytical approach; but a fair-minded examination of Ms. Peto's thesis does not support the allegations made on the floor of the Legislative Assembly, which fail to distinguish between anti-Semitism and criticism of Zionism or Israel.

MESA rejects all forms of hate speech, discrimination and racism, including anti-Semitism, and it supports prompt and forceful action in response to anti-Semitic propaganda and incidents on university campuses. But we believe that expanding the definition of anti-Semitism to encompass an indefensibly broad range of legitimate speech and conduct is likely to weaken efforts to combat it effectively. Furthermore, efforts to demonize academic and other critics of Israel or Zionism by tarring them with the brush of anti-Semitism may contribute to an already troubling environment of harassment, intimidation and censorship of faculty and students on university campuses, thereby threatening academic freedom and freedom of expression. This is particularly true when parliamentarians, whose funding decisions affect the operation of institutions like the University of Toronto, make ungrounded and misinformed allegations on the floor of the legislature.

We therefore urge you to withdraw your public characterization of Ms. Peto's thesis as anti-Semitic, and more generally to exercise greater caution about making unsupported assertions and insinuations that may threaten academic freedom and the unfettered expression and exchange of ideas and opinions.

Sincerely,

Suad Joseph  
MESA President  
Professor of Anthropology & Women's Studies, University of California, Davis

cc:

Professor Sheryl Nestel  
Professor Julia O'Sullivan  
Professor Rinaldo Walcott  
Professor Cheryl Misak  
Professor David Naylor