

Press Release - for immediate release
18th October 2012

International academics condemn "bias" of Israeli CHE in closure row

Over 600 academics from all over the world have signed a petition to the Israeli Council of Higher Education (CHE) calling on them not to close the Department of Politics and Government of Ben Gurion University of the Negev (BGU).

The Department is notable for the high quality of its staff, their excellent publication record, and their critical analyses of Israel's policies. Over the past 2 years it has come under fierce attack from the right-wing Zionist organisation Im Tirtzu. The proposal to close the Department appears to be in response to this political pressure.

The whole process has been mired in controversy from the start, with widespread accusations of political interference. Originally the CHE had established an international evaluation committee to scrutinize political science departments in Israel, which after some dubious changes to its composition produced a report that was accused of bias and inaccuracy regarding key facts.(1)

The department at BGU was instructed to introduce mainstream positivist political science into its research and curricula. If it failed to do so, the committee said, the CHE should consider shutting it down.

The excellent quality of scholarship members of the department have produced, and the fact that they are frequent and welcome guests at prestigious academic institutes (Radcliff College at Harvard; the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton; the School of Public Health at Chicago; Cambridge University) found little echo in the report. The committee was also not impressed with the average grant per faculty member, which is over \$100,000, a relatively high sum in the discipline, and perhaps the highest among political science departments in Israel.

The committee took issue with the "excessive social activism" of the department's members and its interdisciplinary ethos (half of the faculty come from fields like political geography, public health, and history).

The administration of BGU responded by instructing the department to hire three faculty members in specified areas and to introduce some changes to the curriculum. Two international evaluators - Thomas Risse and Ellen M. Immergut, appointed by the CHE to oversee the implementation of the report - wrote in a letter sent to the Council that they "congratulate the department on successfully recruiting three new faculty members in the areas of comparative politics, quantitative methods, and political theory, and for its plans for a fourth recruitment next year." They called upon the University to allow these young scholars "the time, resources, and mentoring to publish in top ranked international refereed journals and university presses," in a way that would help the department "fulfil its deficits in mainstream political science," adding that "the department should increase its diversity in terms of methods and theoretical orientations in future recruitments". No criticism or sanctions were mentioned in this letter.

It therefore came as a shock to members of the Department and to their colleagues around the world when a CHE sub-committee proposed to shut down the department because it supposedly failed to comply with the report of the international committee.

Professor Jonathan Rosenhead of the London School of Economics said: "This is an attempt to close down a university department because the publications and views of its members offend the government. If it goes through, world academia will know exactly where Israel stands on the question of academic freedom."

Prof. Haim Bresheeth said: "This is a crude and brutal attack on academic freedom, which all intellectuals should oppose and resist. As an Israeli academic living and working abroad, I feel duty-bound to offer support to Israeli academics who are trying to exercise freedom of speech and academic freedom."

Prof. Rosenhead and colleagues launched an electronic petition, which within a short time had gathered over 600 signatures, including several eminent names such as Prof. Judith Butler of UC Berkeley and Prof. Noam Chomsky of MIT.⁽²⁾ Prof. Butler commented: "This is one of the truly outstanding Political Science departments in the world, and the faculty is among the most renowned and respected. It is clear that restrictions on academic freedom have accelerated into threats to close whole departments." Prof. Chomsky wrote that it was "a matter of great significance for maintaining the integrity of higher education in Israel".

The campaign has united both supporters and opponents of the academic boycott of Israel: while Prof. Rosenhead is the chair of BRICUP (British Committee for the Universities of Palestine), one of the signatories is Robert Fine, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick, a vocal opponent of the academic boycott, who wrote: "The defence of academic freedom is vital whether the threats come from authorities inside Israel or from boycotters". Joshua Cherniss of Harvard University was quite explicit: "Those of us who oppose academic boycotts of Israel will find it harder to collaborate with Israeli colleagues if those colleagues' departments are shut down for political reasons."

The CHE's actions have invited comparisons with which they would probably feel uncomfortable. One signatory, Prof. Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, commented on the site: "The whole thing reminds me of my studies of the struggle for cultural freedom in the former Soviet bloc", and another remarked "Israel is gradually becoming like Saudi Arabia". One professor of politics wrote: "I find the politically motivated decision to effectively close the poli sci department at Ben Gurion a reprehensible act worthy of Nazi Germany."

The petition was sent to the CHE by Prof. Rosenhead today.

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Notes to Editors

1. Examples of bias and inaccuracies: The committee counted only 50% of the refereed articles published by department members. While criticizing the

department at BGU, they praised the department of political science at Tel-Aviv University which published the same amount of articles but has twice as many faculty members. They erroneously stated that faculty members had not published books in leading academic publishing houses, whereas the 9 full-time faculty have, in fact, published six books in the three years prior to the report, of which three appeared in the top 10 university presses (California, Cornell, Columbia), two more with Routledge, and a sixth with the top press in France.

2. A copy of the petition is attached. Notable signatories include:

Prof. Daniel Boyarin, UC Berkeley
Prof. Judith Butler, UC Berkeley
Prof. Noam Chomsky, Dept. Of Linguistics & Philosophy, MIT
Prof. Lawrence Davidson, West Chester University
Ian Hacking, College de France
Prof. Werner Hamacher, Goethe University Frankfurt
Professor Marian Hobson, Member Of The British Academy
Professor Jean Jackson, Anthropology Department, MIT
Ira Noveck, CNRS, Centre de Recherche Francais à Jérusalem
Claus Offe, Hertie School of Governance, Berlin
Bertell Ollman Dept of Politics NYU
Marshall Sahlins University of Chicago
Emeritus Prof Neil Smith, Linguistics, University College London
Professor Bernardo Sorj - Federal University Of Rio De Janeiro
Howard Stein, Professor Emeritus Of Philosophy, University Of Chicago
Prof. David Stern, Dept. Of Philosophy, University Of Iowa, USA
Prof. Willie Van Peer, Ph.D., Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich
Professor Jordan Zlatev, Centre For Languages And Literature, Lund University, Sweden

3. For further information contact:
Prof. Jonathan Rosenhead