

Appendix 22: email from Dewitt re scaling back the conference, April 15, 2009

To: David B Dewitt <ddewitt@yorku.ca>
From: MappingModels/osgoode
Sent by: Bruce Ryder/osgoode
Date: 04/16/2009 01:21PM
cc: sdrummond@osgoode.yorku.ca, aiken@post.queensu.ca,
MazenMasri@osgoode.yorku.ca, BRyder@osgoode.yorku.ca
Subject: Re: Suggestions - Israel/Palestine conference

Dear David,

Thanks for your message. As difficult as it is for us to hear negative assessments of the upcoming conference, we appreciate very much your willingness to offer us frank and constructive feedback.

We have given consideration to your suggestion that we consider a scaled-back conference featuring a dozen or so of our strongest speakers. Even if we did agree that such a course of action were desirable, it just isn't possible this far along in the planning process. We have over 50 confirmed speakers, and all were asked last month to indicate whether they required travel funding to facilitate their participation. We have offered partial or full travel funding to roughly 30 speakers, and many have already made their travel plans. Disinviting dozens of speakers at this point, and asking them to cancel their travel plans, would be devastating to the academic reputation of the conference sponsors and organizers. We continue to seek out speakers to fill gaps in the program or otherwise help us achieve the academic goals of the conference, and we continue to welcome all suggestions in this regard.

With best wishes,

Sharry Aiken

Susan Drummond

Mazen Masri

Bruce Ryder

To: MappingModels/osgoode <MappingModels@osgoode.yorku.ca>
From: David B Dewitt <ddewitt@yorku.ca>
Date: 04/15/2009 05:52PM
cc: Susan Drummond/osgoode <SDrummond@osgoode.yorku.ca>
Subject: Re: Suggestions - Israel/Palestine conference

Dear Susan, Bruce and Sharry,

Thanks for your note.

I'm pleased that you made contact with Irv Abella and that you'll be able to meet with him. I'll be interested to learn the results of your conversation.

I continue to be concerned about the conference. While I recognize your intent and I acknowledge that underlying it is a genuine intellectual investigation on your parts, as we discussed others may and do see it differently, from various sides.

I guess the best way I can express it, although it may sound somewhat extreme, is comparing it to a conference on the Holocaust. One is under no obligation to give over the venue to Holocaust deniers in order to achieve "balance," and objectivity simply is not part of the discourse. In the socio-political context in which Middle East affairs is now presented, and given the legacy of nationalism and state building not to speak of imperialism and colonialism in the region, posing the theme as has been done for this conference and giving space -- both intellectual and physical/material -- to individuals, some with serious academic credentials, others who by their past actions have been tarnished by ideology and polemic, your well-meaning effort to unpack the challenges facing both Israelis and Palestinians is being hijacked. Balance and objectivity here are not appropriate criteria for what I understand has been your intent.

As you and I discussed, I personally see nothing wrong with asking some very tough and fundamental questions about "models of statehood or of national aspirations" so long as it is very clear that we are not entertaining the elimination of the Jewish national homeland or questioning the legitimacy of the State of Israel or its right to live within secure and recognized boundaries. Alas, I continue to think that this baseline has been crossed.

Under these circumstances, I continue to be unable to participate and I also can't really provide you with anyone who might be appropriate for what you -- quite understandably and appropriately -- want to lead off the conference. Someone, say, of the stature of Shlomo Avineri at the Hebrew University, Asher Susser at Tel-Aviv University, Gabi Ben-Dor at Haifa University, David Newman at Ben-Gurion University, or even Emmanuel Adler now at the U of Toronto, will not participate.

However, I do have a suggestion which I previously raised, at least in passing. Since your SSHRC grant is insufficient to cover the expenses of the conference but its rules require this to be "public" (ie., not restricted to "by invitation only"), and since you already seem pretty confident that you have about a dozen or so strong contributions by recognized and worthy individuals, why not notify all that due to financial constraints (and everyone now knows about those!) the program has had to be reduced to a shorter time (one day perhaps or day plus a morning) for the presentation of those 12 or so papers, and only those individuals will receive financial support and be on the program. Others are certainly invited to attend in the audience and to participate from that vantage point, but not to present.

You do that and even though you (and York and Osgoode) may still face some "community" difficulties, you will have diverted the situation to one of managing some unhappiness while being able to move forward with your project, including the book. You also will be able to do another

revision to the website which would allow you to clarify as you deem appropriate both the core of the undertaking while confirming some fundamentals which could allay those who wish to think badly of what you are trying to do. You will never be able to satisfy those whose minds are fully made up, but you should be able to fulfil your academic responsibilities to SSHRC, accomplish much of what you are hoping for in terms of serious engagement, and come out with a respectable book.

Happy to continue the conversation.

Best wishes, d.

David B. Dewitt

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