

Statement to Senate on the Negev Dinner

Dr. Paul Davenport
March 14, 2008

Last fall I was invited by the Jewish National Fund, Ontario region, to be the 2008 Negev Dinner honouree, in recognition of my commitment to diversity, tolerance, and defending human rights. These are values that were part of the fabric at Western before I arrived here in 1994 and I have worked diligently to promote and defend them during my tenure here. I am proud to accept the Negev honor because I feel it recognizes this tradition at Western, which is very important to me.

A second purpose of the Negev dinner is to support an environmental project under the direction of the Jewish National Fund, often involving reforestation, water treatment, or rehabilitation of springs and other provision of fresh water. My wife Josette and I have selected the En Ro'im Spring Development project in northern Israel, a project that will benefit all those who live in the area.

My decision to accept this honour has both disappointed and angered some in our community; I have received expressions of concern and condemnation from outside London. I have also received letters of support. Many of the communications critical of my decision refer to the land policies of the JNF and Israel.

The issues surrounding land use in Israel are emotional ones with a long and complex history. The Jewish National Fund, established in 1901, is part of that history. Israel is a democracy, and Israelis are currently involved in an intense debate over those policies, with strong feelings on all sides. Legal challenges remain before Israel's High Court and it is my sincere hope that these issues can be resolved in a way that is fair to all parties.

I hope my colleagues and the community at large—whether they are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, or of other faiths and beliefs—will understand that my goal is not to cause divisions at Western or in London, but rather to accept this award as recognition of the commitment by Western, as well as myself, to celebrate diversity and promote tolerance and free speech. I am aware of how strongly and passionately some members of our community disagree with my decision and I respect their right to do so. I believe Western should be a place where free speech and divergent ideas are not simply tolerated but encouraged. It is with these principles in mind that I am accepting the Negev award.

In closing, I note that Negev honors have been given out in Canada for more than 50 years. Academic and hospital leaders so honored have included McGill Principal Bernard Shapiro, McMaster President Peter George, and the Vice-President Research of the London Health Sciences Centre, Joe Gilbert. Chief Justices have been honored, including Ivan Rand. Also honored have been federal political leaders including Prime Ministers John Diefenbaker and Jean Chretien and Justice Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan. Other leaders selected have included Premiers David Peterson and Gary Doer, as well as BC Deputy Premier Grace McCarthy and Alberta's Lieutenant Governor Dr. Lois Hole. I am proud to join the company of these distinguished Canadians.