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Baird receives Wiesenthal Center's Award of Valour

Paul Lungen, Staff Reporter, Monday, November 3, 2014



Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Center CEO Avi Benlolo with Foreign Minister John Baird

TORONTO — Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (FSWC) is known for fighting anti-Semitism, educating for tolerance and supporting the State of Israel, so it should come as no surprise that in a speech in which he accepted the organization's Award of Valour, Foreign Minister John Baird touched all

three bases.

During a visit to Amsterdam, Baird said, he took the time to visit the Anne Frank House, the location where Anne, her family and several other Jews hid behind a false wall, hoping to escape the Nazis.

Today it's a museum, but the creak of the wooden floors reminded him of the danger Anne and the others faced every day. Anne and the others were caught not long before liberation, but in walking through the museum, Baird said he came across an interesting item Anne had placed on the wall – a small black-and-white postcard of Jerusalem.

It "gave her comfort," said Baird, and today remains "very powerful." In signing the museum's guest book, he noted the need to fight anti-Semitism in all its forms, and to an audience of about 250 in Toronto at the FSWC's State of the Union Luncheon last week, he said the targeting of the individual Jew by anti-Semites has evolved into targeting the collective Jew, as represented by the State of Israel.

"Anti-Semitism is beginning to pass the dinner-table test," cloaked in references to Zionism and Israel, he said.

In naming Baird as the FSWC's Award of Valour recipient, president and CEO Avi Benlolo commended the minister for supporting Israel, standing against anti-Semitism and showing determination in preserving democracy.

Baird has criticized the UN General Assembly for voting to recognize a Palestinian state. He has also signed the Ottawa Protocol on Combating Antisemitism and during his tenure, Canada shut the Iranian embassy in Ottawa, Benlolo said.

During his address, Baird noted that the recent terrorist attack in Ottawa has "not shaken our identity or our resolve one iota."

One of the first calls received afterwards by Prime Minister Stephen Harper was from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Baird concluded by noting that Canada and Israel share the values of freedom, human rights and the rule of law.

Supporting Israel is easy, he said. "We feel it in our bones."

Keynote speaker John Bolton, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, pointed to the attack on Parliament, saying "it's a signal that the war on terror is far from over." He suggested it was an attempt to break the linkage between the United States and its allies in confronting ISIS. "This is not the time for the West to split apart," he said.

Bolton, who served at the UN under former president George W. Bush, suggested the West was losing conviction in its own values. Its opponents sense that.

He said there are people in the United States who would like the country to become less assertive, to withdraw from world affairs, and who feel the world would be better off if U.S. influence lessened. But developments demonstrate the opposite, Bolton said. "It's not our strength that is provocative. It's our weakness that's provocative."

Surveying a number of trouble spots, Bolton said Russia, China, and a number of countries in the Middle East are either asserting themselves in ways detrimental to the West or are descending into chaos. "If you want a strong America, say so," he suggested. "If not, beware of what you get."

Others addressing the FSWC luncheon included Simon Deng, a Sudanese human rights activist, who was once a child slave. Children in Sudan can still be bought for only \$10 and despite slavery in that country and millions dead at the hands of the Arab government in Khartoum, "the United Do Nothing Nations" focuses its attention on condemning Israel, he said.

Deng left the stage with an emotional appeal for help for the people of South Sudan.