

My thanks to the Honorable Members of the Maine Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary to allow me to submit my testimony at today's hearing. My mother was a naturalized citizen from Italy and suffered once in America as a result of the then fear and hatred of the Mafia into which all natural-born Americans seemed to believe all "dirty dagos" or "wops" or "guidos" came from. Mom was a seamstress pieceworker, but she was told she had to clean the toilets for the others during her lunch break. None of the other 'American' girls got that assignment. When I learned of this, my conclusion was that bad stuff can happen to you when those in power over you are ignorant. Mom eventually met my father after he got a Bronze Star and Purple Heart for fighting the Nazis during WWII in France.

As my parent's firstborn, I was the first in the family to get a graduate degree and eventually became the mayor of the village in which my Singaporean husband and I once called home. My spouse was a minority also in his home country. Luckily, he is exceptionally smart and extremely aware of the same type of negative consequences and experiences even a half a world away, but instead of cleaning toilets, his professional life (and therefore earning potential) was limited due to his ethnicity. So, he moved to the Promised Land: America, so full of promise!

Some 30 years later, the one thing that has changed for the better in both our lives is that we now proudly call Maine our home. This is a special place. We have found an incredible amount of tolerance for the "other" here that is often not seen elsewhere in America, at least not in our experiences. It is precisely because we believe tolerance and wisdom is abundant in Maine that I come before you in this Public Hearing appalled that the Judiciary Committee would even entertain such a flawed legislation. I was the declared qualified third choice on the CD2 ballot November 2024 because although I've been a registered democrat most of my adult life, I could not support Jared Golden who has accepted over a half million dollars from AIPAC – the only allowed lobby representing a foreign country on our soil – and he would not stop voting to fund the ongoing genocide in Palestine. I was so outraged that my own tax dollars were supporting apartheid, ethnic cleansing and genocide that I decided I would have to vote for myself rather than vote to condone an immoral, unethical and internationally illegal action.

As a member of Jewish Voices for Peace I am well aware that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism conflates criticism of Israel and Zionism with antisemitism, it is therefore FLAWED. It was never intended to serve as a legal framework for institutions or governments. Indeed, 7 of the 11 "contemporary examples of antisemitism" in the IHRA definition involve criticism of the state of Israel, and not the Jewish people. The definition was established as a guideline, not an enforceable law. Defining antisemitism so broadly and vaguely will have chilling effects on free speech, scholarship and public dialogue around international affairs and current events.

And because IHRA's definition is FLAWED, the consequences to me and others who wish to protest the use of our American tax dollars to pay for and support ethnic

cleansing, apartheid, the annihilation or removal of an entire Palestinian people therefore becomes an infringement of my free speech to protest. How can we protest if we cannot use the right and correct words? Being unable to use the right words -- to call it what it is -- would therefore greatly infringe on free speech and our collective ability to help hold governments, like Israel, accountable. Contrary to combating genuine antisemitism, this legislation would have the effect of suppressing, non-violent protest, activism and speech that's critical of Israel and/or Zionism. The definition has historically been used to target professors, students, grassroots organizations, human rights groups, and even members of the US Congress, who criticize Israeli policies or human rights violations.

Many leading antisemitism experts, and scholars of Jewish studies and the Holocaust, as well as free speech and anti-racism experts, challenge the definition, arguing that it restricts legitimate criticism of Israel and undermines the fight against antisemitism. Even Ken Stern, the main drafter of the IHRA definition, recently reiterated his concerns about institutions adopting the IHRA definition stating concerns that it's "a blunt instrument to label anyone an antisemite."

There are those currently in power who are clearly actively trying to suppress free speech and the peaceful right to protest. We've seen it time and time again even within the last 90 days so we all still have fresh images in our mind's eye. I urge the Judiciary Committee to REJECT and DO NOT ADOPT this dangerous definition of antisemitism. To adopt this flawed definition of antisemitism would be a cruel attack on free speech which should most definitely NOT come to Maine. WE ARE BETTER THAN THAT!

I appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony and furthermore would welcome the opportunity – both myself and my spouse – to meet personally for further discussion which could be very helpful and interesting since our backgrounds are broad in many ways. We feel strongly we must do everything in our power to thwart this process urgently. Communicating rationally should bode well when the parties care about democracy.

Respectfully submitted for your consideration, and with thanks.

Diana Merenda
Town of Surry
Member of the Town's Finance Committee
Educator and part-time consultant

Diana Merenda

Surry

LD 1351

Good morning,

I've uploaded my testimony but just in case there's going to be a time limitation I will reduce my verbal remarks over Zoom to fit the timeclock. On the other hand, if there's no timeclock I can say the entire testimony.

Thank you