



Why Not a Parliamentary Coalition on Women's Issues?

By Joanne Naiman

This past summer individuals and groups were asked to make submissions to the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism, which had been formed in the spring as a follow-up to the inaugural conference of the Interparliamentary Committee for Combating Antisemitism, held in London, UK.¹ Although I've been a political activist for a long time, my involvement in groups pertaining to the Middle East had, to this point, been minimal. Like so many Jews, it was awkward for me to speak publicly or write about these issues. However, given that I was both a Jew and a sociologist, I felt I was in a special position to assess anti-Semitism in Canada, and so I made a submission. Of course, I could tell from the CPCCA website that their true purpose was not primarily to examine real anti-Semitism, but rather to redefine any criticism of Israel as a "new" form of anti-Semitism.

It was not difficult to guess that those of us who made submissions to the CPCCA, but who did not agree with the parameters of the Coalition, were unlikely to be called as "witnesses" to the Hearings that were to be held through the fall of 2009. This has indeed turned out to be the case. However, having taken the time to write that submission, I decided to send it along to some friends so that at least a few folks would actually have a chance to read it. A few months later, it was reprinted electronically in *The Bullet*.²

As a result of writing that submission, I became extremely interested in—and concerned about—the CPCCA, which was getting almost no attention in the media. Its obvious bias, its total lack of democratic process, its secretive funding, and its obvious—and dangerous—direction were very troubling to me. In November, a number of groups in Vancouver met to discuss possible responses, and out of that first meeting four of us had a meeting with our local Liberal MP, Joyce Murray, who is on the CPCCA, to express some of our concerns. Despite her apparent interest, nothing further came out of that meeting.

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On December 6th, the Solidarity Notes Labour Choir, of which I am a member, performed at the commemoration of the Montreal Massacre. The Master of Ceremonies was Dr. Hedy Fry, a Liberal MP who is another of the 21 parliamentarians on the CPCCA. While standing out in the cold on that beautiful sunny day, I was suddenly seized with an idea that I could not shake. While Dr. Fry was there passionately describing the continuing violence against women in Canada, back in Ottawa she was sitting on a bizarre quasi-official (and—to date—secretly funded) committee that was investigating what can only be described as a persistent but minor social problem in this country. I went home that afternoon, and wrote the following letter to Fry (with a copy to Joyce Murray, Caroline Bennett, and Judy Wasylcia-Leis, the three other women sitting on the CPCCA):

"Dear Dr. Fry,

"This past Sunday—the twentieth anniversary of the Montreal massacre—I attended the memorial you spoke at in Vancouver. Your speech was moving and touched on the real concerns of women across the country. However, while you spoke, I was seething underneath. You see, I am a retired sociologist, an activist, and a Jew. This summer, I made a submission to the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism, of which you are a member. In that submission, I noted that, while anti-Semitism certainly exists in Canada, it is a minor social problem when compared to, say, homelessness, the conditions of indigenous people, or other forms of ethno-racial discrimination. I am ashamed to say that what I didn't think to compare it to, but should have, is the problems faced by women in this country.

"I stood in the cold with you on Sunday thinking to myself that my chances of being harmed—whether with words, low wages, or by a gun—are statistically far greater as a result of my being female than my being Jewish. For example, if I were a young Jewish woman on a university campus in Canada, I would be at much greater risk of experiencing physical assault or abuse because of my gender than because of my religion. On average, 182 females were killed every year in Canada between 1994 and 2003 www.statcan.gc.ca and almost half of all women in 1998 reported having been sexually assaulted after leaving high school (Jewish Women International, www.jwicanada.com). And if I were a native woman, I would be at least five times more likely than other women in Canada to die as the result of violence.

"I am not trying to make an invidious comparison between the suffering of one group as compared to another, but the facts speak for themselves. Anti-Semitism is an odious but minor reality in Canada, and has been so for many years. Meanwhile, the conditions for women have been deteriorating, and most of the poor in this country continue to be women. In recent years funding to women's organizations has been cut

¹ For more details, the official CPCCA website is at www.cpcca.ca

² My submission can be viewed at www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/270.php.

drastically, a proposed national childcare program has been abandoned, unions are being attacked resulting in lower wages and worsening working conditions for many women (particularly in B.C.), the long gun registry is under threat of being dismantled, native women continue to suffer the consequence of their peoples' horrific maltreatment, and—according to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (Nov 2008)—‘...hundreds of cases involving Aboriginal women who have gone missing or been murdered in the past two decades have neither been fully investigated nor attracted priority attention.’ I'm sure, Dr. Fry, that you are well aware of these facts.

“The obvious question, then, is, why have you agreed to participate in this unprecedented and undemocratic Parliamentary Coalition that is spending a great deal of time and money investigating what must be described as a minor social problem? Instead, why aren't you and your party calling for a similar entity to resolve even a few of the serious problems faced by untold numbers of women in this country? Imagine if we had a Canadian Parliamentary Coalition on Women's Issues (CPCWI) that planned to make its report to government in the next few months and—as seems to be the case with the CPCCA—expected ‘that the Government will respond to it by the spring of 2010 (CPCCA news release, June 2, 2009).’ Just imagine if this government were to respond to women's concerns so quickly and so favourably.

“Of course, as others have recently noted, the CPCCA—in line with the International Commission for Combatting Anti-Semitism—is not primarily about anti-Semitism at all, but rather is clearly an attempt to muzzle serious legitimate debate about and criticism of the policies of the State of Israel

towards Palestinians—men, women and children. This is clear from reading the CPCCA website. How else can one explain why this Coalition has largely ignored submissions from among the many individuals and groups (including those in the Jewish community) who are critical of Israel's policies? Why is the last group to be called to these hearings (in January and February of 2010) police officers, whom, we are told, will make ‘recommendations regarding standard definitions of antisemitism to be adopted by police forces across the country?’ Why else would this Coalition expect the Conservative-led government to respond so favourably and so quickly to its report? Lastly, why, despite statements to the contrary on its website, has the CPCCA refused to date to reveal its funding sources?

“As a Jew, I am proud of our tradition as a caring and compassionate people that has advocated for universalism, that is, the rights and freedoms of all people. It is this tradition that led many Jews to actively support the Black civil rights movement in the United States and the struggle to end Apartheid in South Africa. But while the narrow and dangerous terms of reference of this Coalition therefore make me outraged, they also make me afraid. As noted in my submission, this unprecedented Parliamentary Coalition will doubtless convince those already predisposed to believe it that Jews hold undue sway in the political arena, and it will therefore inevitably fan the flames of anti-Semitism in this country. I therefore, lastly, ask you to explain to me why you and your party continue to be part of the CPCCA.

“I look forward to your early response in this serious matter.

I have yet to receive a reply from Dr. Fry or any of the other recipients of this letter.♦

Canadian Friends of Peace Now Condemns Attacks on the New Israel Fund

TORONTO (February 10, 2010). Canadian Friends of Peace Now strongly condemns the vicious attacks on the New Israel Fund, on its Chair, Naomi Chazan, and on the NIF's grantee organizations which are quoted in the United Nations fact-finding mission's report on last year's Gaza war.

In recent days, an Israeli right-wing organization launched a vile campaign to discredit the New Israel Fund, its chair and some of its grantee organizations. This attack includes *ad hominem* attacks against Professor Chazan in newspaper ads that show the former Knesset Member with a horn on her forehead.

We are deeply disturbed by the content of this campaign and shocked by its style, which is reminiscent of dark times in our people's history.

The NIF grantees that are quoted in the UN report on Operation Cast Lead were performing their duty as Israeli human rights organizations by monitoring and reporting on controversial policies of their government

and their military. Such human rights organizations are an integral part of any vibrant democracy and as such, they are an integral—and vital—part of Israel's civil society.

The New Israel Fund is an asset to Israel's democracy, as are its grantee organizations. Attempts to silence them should not be tolerated by the Israeli public and by friends of a free and democratic Israel worldwide.

We call on all friends of Israel to join us in denouncing and rejecting these contemptible attempts to muzzle Israel's civil society groups, and we urge civility in debates over public policy.

Canadian Friends of Peace Now is a Zionist organization and a member of the Canadian Jewish Congress. It is dedicated to enhancing Israel's security through peace and to supporting the Israeli Peace Now movement. For further information:

www.peacenowcanada.org,