

Statement

Secretary of
State for
External Affairs



Déclaration

Secrétaire d'État
aux Affaires
extérieures

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AS DELIVERED

AN ADDRESS BY
THE HONOURABLE BARBARA McDOUGALL,
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,
TO THE TWENTY-THIRD PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE
CANADIAN JEWISH CONGRESS

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Canada

I would like to begin by extending my best wishes to Les Scheininger, Moshe Ronen, and all the other members of the outgoing executive of Canadian Jewish Congress, many of whom I have had the pleasure of working with since they came into office in 1989.

I would also like to extend my congratulations to Irving Abella and the rest of the incoming executive of Canadian Jewish Congress. You can be assured that my door will be open to you and to your concerns, and may you have much success in your continuing endeavours on behalf of the Jewish people of Canada and your brothers and sisters around the world.

I had the pleasure of being in Montreal in 1989 when the outgoing executive members began their term of office, and in many ways I feel a very close bond with them, because many of the issues they were attempting to address were important issues on my own agenda as well, first as Minister of Employment and Immigration, and more recently as Secretary of State for External Affairs.

In 1989, high on the agenda were the plight of Soviet Jewry and the continuing efforts to liberate Syrian and Ethiopian Jews. I met many times with Congress and its representatives on these issues. I am sure that I would not be alone in this room if I were to admit that the events that have taken place in these areas in such a short period of time are almost beyond belief.

Of course, the Jewish people are no strangers to miracles -- in fact, as someone said, "Not only do the Jewish people expect miracles, they rely on them."

This is something we Progressive Conservatives understand; indeed, relying on miracles is part of our election campaign strategy, and it sure confuses the pollsters!

There is much to be joyful about today. The hundreds of thousands of Jews who have emigrated from what was once the Soviet Union are like hundreds of thousands of seedlings. Their lives have been transplanted from a barren and repressive soil to one that is rich and fertile in the land of Israel. Their hardy strain cannot help but flourish in the warmth and nurturing of their new homeland.

So, too, the Jews of Ethiopia rejoin their long lost families in Israel to continue and expand the traditions that they have held to with unbelievable faith and steadfastness over generations of isolation, persecution and assimilation.

The most recent developments in Syria, highlighted by the release of the Swed brothers from prison last Passover, augur well for the 3,800 Jews who remain in that country from the more than 30,000 that lived there before 1948. As with most situations in the Middle East, each change is often fragile and ephemeral, and

we will continue to monitor this situation closely from our Embassy in Damascus.

In my view, one person more than any other -- not just in Canada but in the world -- turned that situation around. Judy Feld Carr, the Chairperson of the National Task Force for Syrian Jews, who has worked tirelessly for the Jews of Syria, has been responsible in no small way for the considerable progress we have witnessed.

It just shows what one individual -- and the 24-hour fax machine -- can accomplish.

But in a world of such rapid change, no one can afford to be complacent. The Jewish people have learned this lesson well over their long and often tragic history.

With all the dramatic developments that we have seen over the past 18 to 24 months, the world is still not a safe and stable place. And, as in most instances of instability, the dangers to the Jewish people are often multiplied several times over.

Anti-Semitism in the republics of the former Soviet Union remains. It may linger beneath the surface and fester, but inevitably it will emerge. It is often linked to economic issues, and this evening I leave for Lisbon to continue the work of an international group co-ordinating economic assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States.

We are developing far-reaching programs based on the integrity of markets and fundamental economic reforms. An empty stomach can be a powerful incentive for intolerance, hatred and, eventually, upheaval. We must ensure that one form of repression is not simply replaced by another.

While this particular planning group is working on economic reform, Canada is also assisting with democratic development bilaterally as well as through organizations such as the Group of Seven (G-7).

There are also other arenas. I have just returned from a meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) where the principal item for discussion was the deterioration of democracy in Haiti and Peru. Again, economic conditions are a powerful factor in the developments in these countries.

We do not have easy solutions at our disposal, and often our choice of policy instruments, such as the use of economic sanctions, can have an unintended side effect of further aggravating the economic well-being of those people who are the poorest of the population.

It is a difficult dilemma, but my recent trip to South Africa has confirmed to me that sanctions can have a powerful effect on changing the domestic policies of governments. I am sure that the Jewish community in Canada rejoiced with millions of other people around the world this spring, as the pillars of apartheid began to fall.

Canadians can take particular pride in these developments, because it was the late Prime Minister John Diefenbaker who initiated the tough stance by the Commonwealth against South Africa, although he did say that "Canada would always keep a light on in the window for South Africa." Prime Minister Mulroney and my predecessor in this portfolio, the Right Honourable Joe Clark, were also instrumental in maintaining the pressure that has led to a slow but relentless change of heart by the leaders of South Africa. With the rest of the world, Canada anxiously awaits concrete signs that this progress is real and sustainable, and that the politics of race are dead once and for all in South Africa.

Ethnic hatred has been the source of instability in another world "hot spot" -- the troubled republics of the former country of Yugoslavia. Anti-Semitism has a long history in this region and is only one of a number of elements of a highly charged and volatile ethnic mix. Canada has played a forceful diplomatic role through the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) and the United Nations, and as a major participant in the large UN peacekeeping operation in the region.

The areas of Canadian involvement are as broad as the world, and I have provided this rather brief and selective "tour d'horizon" to remind you that, more than ever, Canada is an active and respected participant on the international scene.

As a member of the G-7, the Commonwealth, la Francophonie, the OAS, the CSCE, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and, of course, the UN, Canada is sought after in virtually every major international organization in the world.

This means that Canadian values and attitudes and standards are reflected in events ranging from the upcoming Earth Summit on the environment in Rio de Janeiro to the complex discussions on future security arrangements for Europe.

For Canadian Jews, that reputation and that presence are even more important when the subject turns to Israel and to peace in the Middle East.

Canada has been steadfast in its support of the international legitimacy of the State of Israel and was instrumental in the campaign that, last fall, finally led to the defeat of the odious UN resolution equating Zionism with racism.

Less prominent but no less important has been our support to Israel by encouraging other countries such as Nigeria, India and Vietnam to establish diplomatic relations with Israel.

Also attracting less attention, but certainly no less important, is a trilateral agreement signed in October 1989, whereby Canada defrays half the costs of training participants from the Third World who come to Israel to learn modern techniques in agriculture and rural development.

All of these actions build legitimacy -- and they build confidence.

These are exactly the objectives of the negotiations on Middle East peace: the bilateral round that began in Madrid last October and the multilateral round inaugurated in Moscow in January on arms control, water, economic development, the environment and refugees.

Canada is pleased to "hold the gavel" for the Working Group on Refugees, which held its first meeting in Ottawa last week. We regret that three major participants in the bilateral negotiations, Syria, Lebanon and Israel, chose not to attend these initial meetings. But some initial progress was made.

The role Canada has taken on is the most sensitive in the multilateral round. It is worth noting that Canada was specifically asked by the two co-sponsors of the peace process, the United States and Russia, to take on this difficult task.

Canada was given direct assurances in Moscow and subsequently by all the major bilateral participants of their support for Canada in this capacity, including assurances to me personally by Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy.

I accepted this role for Canada because I believe that we can legitimately contribute to the peace process, based on our reputation and skills as an "honest broker," especially in the Middle East and especially on refugee issues.

We are not naïve, nor are we starry eyed in our expectations.

In the Jewish tradition, you have a call to action that essentially says, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

As Canadians, in our brief 125 years of existence, we have responded before to calls to action when peace and stability were at stake.

Canadians are believers in peace. If Canada does not respond to a call for peace, who will?

It is a long process -- we have no doubts about that. We also know that nothing in the 44 years of the existence of the State of Israel has ever been easy.

But that is not grounds for giving up or not trying. We do not accept that hostility and mistrust cannot be turned around, even after centuries. We are prepared to be hopeful in starting down the elusive road that will eventually lead to peace.

We chose to be optimistic, and we have reasons for such optimism. The late Menachem Begin found a road to peace with the late President Anwar Sadat of Egypt. They had no map, they had no compass -- only the will to find a way.

Can we not also take inspiration from the courage of the Israelis during the SCUD attacks of the Gulf War, when they repressed a normal response to retaliate, in the interests of a long-term peace?

History is most often made when people "break the mould." If the norm is hatred and retaliation, then history will be made by those who develop new respect between themselves, and a willingness to find new ways to resolve differences besides the use of violence.

That is why Canada supports the bilateral peace process, and that is why Canada clearly recognizes that progress made in the working groups is no substitute for resolution of bilateral issues. We are hopeful that both tracks will ultimately prove beneficial.

You will recall that Canada chose to stand with Israel when the SCUD missiles rained on Tel Aviv. You will be glad to know that the remarkable team who staffed our mission to Israel during those difficult days was recently awarded, by myself, a consular award of merit.

Today, we stand with Israel again -- along with the United States, Russia and others -- in the hope of finding a peaceful settlement in the Middle East.

There is one final issue that I want to address, and that is my optimism for our own country -- Canada.

When I addressed this Congress in Montreal in May 1989, First Ministers were in the slow but deliberate process of ratifying a package of constitutional changes on which they had reached agreement in principle at Meech Lake in April 1987.

A scant 13 months later, the so-called Meech Lake Accord had unravelled, and Canada was thrown onto a roller coaster of uncertainty that has continued until this day.

Thousands of hours of discussion and negotiation later, there are now some signs that consensus is probable. I know that the Canadian Jewish Congress has made important contributions to that progress by its well-considered briefs to various committees and working groups that have crisscrossed this country.

The process is not over and the stakes remain high -- no less than the very future of Canada. That, in itself, is sufficient incentive for all of us to continue to contribute every possible ounce of energy and creativity to the process.

I am often asked, especially by students, if we have contingency plans should Quebec separate. The answer is "no."

This Prime Minister, this Minister, this Government intend not just to keep Canada together but to lay the constitutional foundation for a stronger and more prosperous Canada for the future.

But there are others who also have an interest in the eventual outcome: the entire international community who rely on Canada's strength as a mediator, peacemaker and peacekeeper, who know Canada as a trusted trading partner or as a source of much-needed development assistance.

As I travel from country to country, meeting to meeting, to a person there is amazement that we would even contemplate the break-up of a country such as ours.

Canada internationally is a symbol of peace, justice, tolerance, prosperity and respect for human rights. Canada has led many of the positive changes that have taken place in the world in the 20th century.

Would it make a difference if there were no Canada? You better believe it.

Would a broken-up or broken-down Canada be the leading peacekeeping force in Yugoslavia?

No.

Would a broken-up Canada be asked to bring its wisdom to the Middle East peace progress?

No.

As citizens of Canada and as Jews, you have many difficult issues to address during the days and months ahead. I wish you strength and wisdom in your deliberations. And I pledge to you my continued support and the support of our government as together we search for those roads that lead to peace and stability in Canada and throughout the world.