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## THE MONTEBELLO MYSTERY

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Le Chateau Montebello is a lovely, peaceful and luxurious resort about halfway between Ottawa and Montreal, where one can go to escape the pressures of life in Canada's capital or its great metropolises. Since April, it also has become significant to those who care about Canadian foreign policy toward Israel. A meeting held at the hotel on April 28 and 29 could represent the beginning of a turn in Canadian Middle East policy, yet it is shrouded in secrecy and all attempts to pierce the official veil have been rebuffed. There has been no official release of the participants' names and virtually no information regarding what transpired at the meeting has been made public. The event puzzles outside observers, who have been trying to

discern the meaning of the conclave. Was it simply a discussion group or dialogue, or was there some larger purpose?

### **Thirty Canadian Arabs and Jews Meet**

Although it is difficult to know exactly what occurred, there have been some published reports, especially in the Montreal weekly, The Suburban. It appears that the idea of the gathering was conceived during the winter, before Secretary of State for External Affairs Joe Clark's March 10 speech to the Canada-Israel Committee (CIC), the one that caused such a furor because of its perceived tilt away from Israel. Clark suggested to Geoffrey Pearson, head of the government-funded Canadian Institute for International Peace and

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Security, that a dialogue between Canadian Jews and Canadian Arabs be held in order to contribute to increased mutual understanding. The idea was suggested originally by former Progressive Conservative party leader Robert Stanfield in his 1980 report that followed the awkward Jerusalem embassy episode (when then-Prime Minister Clark reneged on his campaign promise to move Canada's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and asked Stanfield to investigate the Middle East situation and make recommendations). Pearson, with help from the Department of External Affairs, organized the seminar and invited fifteen Jews and fifteen Arabs. A few observers, including Joe Clark himself, were also invited. At the first meeting, two participants from each side presented papers and there was some discussion. A second session is scheduled for August 27-28.

It should be stressed that officially all of the participants were invited in their individual capacities and not to represent either the Jewish or Arab community. Therefore Pearson and the participants maintain that neither community was represented in any corporate sense. Rather it was simply a matter of individual Canadian Jews and Canadian Arabs getting together to discuss issues pertaining to the Middle East.

After the seminar the participants and the host were notably reticent about what transpired. Reportedly the participants undertook to maintain the secrecy of the meeting, which was only open to invited guests. Thus it has been impossible to obtain an authoritative list of the participants. Most of the Jews are now known, but there is great uncertainty as to just who the Arabs were. Attempts by the press and interested outsiders to obtain the list have been rebuffed by Pearson's Institute, by the government, and by the participants. In fact, the unusual secrecy surrounding the entire project is one of the most interesting aspects of the story.

### **A Pending Shift in Canadian Foreign Policy?**

In order to understand the significance of the Montebello seminar, one should remember the reaction to Joe Clark's CIC speech, which was widely regarded among supporters of Israel as a precursor of a contemplated shift in Canadian foreign policy. Clark's speech was very unbalanced; it was much more harshly critical of Israel than of the Arabs. The tone of the speech, which was dominated by the section condemning Israel, suggested that most of the blame for the situation with respect to the Arabs in the territories lies with Israel. On the other hand, his tentative suggestion as to how the impasse might be solved was superficially very balanced. Secretary Clark referred to "a growing international and Canadian consensus [that] takes the position that it is time to establish a peace of mutual recognition, based on territorial compromise and respect by Israelis and Palestinians for each other's legitimate rights." This statement appears to carry symmetry further than has been the case in the past. It suggests that the Arab-Israeli conflict is really a Palestinian-Israeli conflict (a point which he made explicitly) and that blame for the conflict and its consequences is to be apportioned equally. Moreover, the logic of such a position is likely to lead to a call for a sovereign Palestinian state as part of a just solution.

It was no coincidence that the Montebello meeting was planned at about the same time as the Clark speech. Both events should be seen as part of the larger effort to test the waters regarding a possible shift in Canadian foreign policy. For the past several years, Canada has supported the realization of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian Arabs, including the right to a homeland within a clearly-defined territory, namely the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. But until now Canada has not formally endorsed the idea of an independent Palestinian state in those

territories. Such an endorsement would represent a significant departure and would constitute an important foreign policy accomplishment for the Arabs. Through his speech and the Montebello conference, Clark was attempting to learn whether it would be politically feasible for the government to adopt such a position. Given the opposition of the government of Israel, including both major political parties, and most of the Canadian Jewish community to a new Palestinian state, it was important for the government to determine if significant forces within the Jewish community might be brought around to accept the idea, thereby giving it a certain legitimacy.

Thus both examples of testing the waters had to involve Jews. In one case it was the CIC, the body charged by the community with representing it to government and the public on matters involving Israel. In the other case, it was prominent individual Jews, many of them with highly visible ties to the CIC and other major entities in organized national Jewish life. Clark's speech caused an uproar and an outpouring of opposition from within the community. It remains to be seen what the response to the Montebello initiative will be.

#### **Circumventing the Jewish Community Consensus**

The secrecy surrounding the events is an integral part of the scenario. The maintenance of secrecy prevents information from becoming available to the Jewish public, thereby forestalling possible adverse reactions to the meeting and the application of pressure on the participants by the Jewish public at large. It maximizes the ability of the participants to discuss issues without the usual constraints imposed by notions of community discipline. Furthermore it facilitates the possible circumvention of the established official community consensus.

Why would such objectives be important? The answer to that is found in part

in remarks by Pearson that were quoted in a long, but not very informative, article that appeared in The Canadian Jewish News on June 9. In response to questions concerning the purpose of the Montebello seminar, Pearson cited Stanfield's view that "dialogue and goodwill can do things... that Canadians can reach agreement if they put their minds to it." That is the key: to reach agreement. Obviously the organizers of Montebello hope that the participants will reach agreement on a possible solution to what has been characterized as a conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Now there can be no assurance that the group of thirty will reach agreement on anything, even if they hold several additional meetings. But if they do reach agreement it will almost certainly be along the lines of symmetry outlined by Joe Clark on March 10: mutual recognition and a state for each people. Were the group to come to such an agreement and announce that publicly or communicate it privately to Clark, the government could then say that if Canadian Jews and Arabs can agree, then the government should as well, thus opening the way for official Canadian endorsement of a sovereign Palestinian state. Presumably the PLO would then be recognized as the official representative of the Palestinian people, thereby completing a major innovation in Canadian policy.

There is a range of views within the Canadian Jewish community on whether Israel should be prepared to agree to an independent Palestinian state under certain circumstances. Most Jews are opposed, as are all of the leading community organizations, including the CIC and its constituents. The main reason for this opposition is the conviction that an independent Palestinian state is incompatible with the maintenance of the long-term security of Israel. There are also some who believe that a new state would not only be compatible with, but might also enhance, Israel's security. These are people who

sincerely believe that the adoption of their position would be in Israel's best interests. However, they constitute a distinct minority within the community. Therefore it is inconceivable that under present circumstances, a group that represents the Jewish community would be party to an agreement such as that envisioned above. Perhaps the community ought to be debating its position on the issue. But as of now, it is clear that the community is generally opposed to the idea of a Palestinian state, despite the uprising that has been going on since December.

### **Who Were the Jewish "Representatives"?**

It is precisely because of the above considerations that the representativeness of the Jewish participants becomes important. It has been argued that the Jews are there as individuals and not as representatives of the Jewish community, but that argument does not withstand careful scrutiny. The Montebello group was composed not simply of thirty Canadians of various backgrounds who are specialists on or are concerned about the Middle East, but rather of equal numbers of Arabs and Jews. If there were forty or fifty Canadians invited and six or eight were Jews, several others were Arabs, and the rest were Canadians of various other origins, then one could claim that it was simply a group of citizens discussing an important international problem. But the structure of the meeting belies that claim. It would appear that the seminar was set up in such a way so that it could later be said that the Jews and Arabs of Canada got together to discuss the Middle East and were able to agree on certain points.

A further consideration is that several people with key national leadership positions in the community were apparently there. They were invited precisely because they head the Canadian Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith Canada, or CIC and not because of who they are individually. That made the meeting a quasi-official gathering. Therefore it is realistic to

expect that this group of fifteen Jews will be seen by the public, media, and government as representative of the Canadian Jewish community. The question must be asked: Who selected its members and according to what criteria? Did Mr. Pearson know who to invite, or was he advised by members of the Jewish community?

Just who did attend the meeting? The only list that has been published so far appeared in The Suburban and The Jerusalem Post. One cannot be certain of its accuracy, but no other version of the list is available, despite attempts to obtain an official one. According to The Suburban, there were two rabbis present, W. Gunther Plaut and Dow Marmur, respectively the Rabbi Emeritus and the current Rabbi of Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple. Rabbi Plaut is a former president of CJC. There were also three heads of major national Jewish organizations present: Sidney Spivak (CIC), Dorothy Reitman (CJC), and Ralph Snow (B'nai B'rith Canada). Shira Herzog Bessin, the former executive director of CIC, was another participant. Four academics reportedly participated: Howard Adelman of York University, Michael Marrus and Janice Stein of the University of Toronto, and Stephen P. Cohen of the CRB Foundation. Two people with extensive community leadership experience from Toronto were present: Donald Carr and Rose Wolfe. Finally there were two men prominently associated with Canadian Friends of Peace Now: Simon Rosenblum and Mel Shipman. The fifteenth Jewish participant's identity was apparently unknown to The Suburban.

There were reportedly several observers present: Robert Stanfield, Joe Clark, William Barton of the Institute, Clifford Garrard of External Affairs, and Profs. John Sigler of Carleton University and Irwin Cotler of McGill University. Little information is available about the Arab participants. The Suburban mentions three professors: Tareq Ismael of the University of Calgary, Elie Zureik of Queen's

University, and Hassan, otherwise unidentified. Another participant was a Montreal engineer named Qusai Samak, who presented a paper at the meeting.

There has been very little information in the press about the conclave. The Canadian Jewish News, which presumably should be covering such an important story vigorously, carried a small front page box announcing that the seminar had taken place. Several weeks later it ran a long story that focused primarily on Mr. Pearson and his Institute and carried very little information on the meeting itself. The CJA story did not include the names of any participants, even though it appeared after The Suburban had published the list in its May 25 story. In a follow-up story on June 15, The Suburban reported on its difficulties in obtaining information about the matter. However, it did report some significant information: David Azrieli, president of the Canadian Zionist Federation, was not invited; some members of the Jewish delegation were consulted about the membership of the delegation; further meetings are planned.

#### **Weakening the Canada-Israel Committee**

There are a number of very important issues raised by the Montebello affair which, it should be stressed, has not yet run its course. Although one is reluctant to be overly dramatic, there are many observers who believe that the Montebello conference has created a most serious challenge to the Canadian Jewish community in connection with its ongoing effort to deal with the government on matters concerning Israel. Perhaps the central aspect of this challenge has to do with the Canada-Israel Committee, the body that is charged by the major national Jewish organizations to represent the community with a unified voice, especially to the government. The acceptance of invitations, supposedly on a personal basis, by the heads of two of the three constituent organizations, as well as the chairman of the CIC itself, undermines this broad objective.

What the government appears to have done is to circumvent the organized Jewish community in order to find a group of Jews that can be said to represent the community but are more likely to identify with policies to the liking of the Department of External Affairs than the organized community would be. If the heads of the CJC, B'nai B'rith, and CIC consent to participate in a conference where the head of the CZF is deliberately excluded, what does that do to the community's ability to respond to government in the future with a unified voice? It also means that government will be encouraged to attempt to go around the CIC again in the future, making that body increasingly irrelevant.

#### **A Slant Towards Peace Now?**

There is little doubt that the fifteen Jews were selected in order to create an appearance of representing the community. However, whoever selected the participants insured that the group would have a slant toward the position of Peace Now in terms of preferences within the Israeli political system and a more leftist orientation than the Canadian Jewish community in general. Just who advised Pearson on the selection and what criteria were employed is a matter of great concern to the Jewish community and should be made public.

The fiction of the selection of the fifteen as "individuals" should be exposed for what it is. Admittedly many of the participants represent no one but themselves. But when prominent rabbis and heads of national organizations are selected, it is inevitable that they will be perceived as representing the community in some sense. Were Ralph Snow, Dorothy Reitman, and Sidney Spivak selected because of who they are or because of what positions they hold? When David Azrieli, who had been left out of the April conference, was invited to the August meeting with an invitation addressed to him at CZF headquarters, was he being invited simply in his personal capacity? Why was Ralph Snow not invited to the second meeting? Does the fact that his

term as president of B'nai B'rith ended after the first meeting have anything to do with it?

### **Should Diaspora Jews Be Negotiating About Israeli Security?**

Finally, there are two issues concerning the relationship between Israel and diaspora Jews. First of all, should diaspora Jews be negotiating on behalf of Israel? If individual Jews, or even groups of individuals, meet with Arabs, with non-Jews, with government officials, with the press, to discuss the questions of war and peace in the Middle East, there can be little objection. But when a group which is set up in effect to represent the Jewish community meets with a corresponding Arab group, there is a great risk that its deliberations, and especially any conclusions, will be seen as a form of Arab-Israeli negotiations. Such activity can undermine the position of the legitimate government of Israel, an outcome that Jews in the diaspora ought to avoid, even if they are convinced that they know better than the Israeli government what must be done.

Then there is the question of whether diaspora Jews have independent interests on matters where Israel is concerned.

What needs to be clarified is how the events in the territories during 1987-88 affect diaspora Jews. Do they see the uprising simply in terms of how it affects Israel's security, negotiating, or even moral position, or do they view it additionally as an event which affects their positions as Jews in the diaspora? What is the appropriate response to such a dilemma?

Montebello has raised a number of profound issues for Canadian Jews. The resolution of these issues is likely to have a profound effect on the community's future ability to function on matters concerning Israel.

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