

Canada: Toronto March Against Anti-Semitism - White Privilege Masquerades as Anti-Racism

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Why does a demonstration of hundreds of people against “anti-Semitism” in Toronto seem more like a march for white supremacy than a rally against racism?

On August 20, reported the Canadian Jewish News, several thousand took to Bathurst Street under the slogan “We Will Not be Silent: A March Against Global Anti-Semitism.” The demonstration was organized by United Jewish Appeal Federation of Greater Toronto, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, B’nai Brith Canada, Canada Israel Experience, March of the Living Canada and the Jewish National Fund (JNF) Canada.

If one were to take the organizers’ slogan seriously this demonstration was among the largest anti-racist mobilizations in recent Canadian history. But, unfortunately it was little more than a group of “white” people calling for the further subjugation of “brown” folk.

Photos and articles suggest that many among the racially homogenous crowd carried Israeli flags and celebrated that country’s recent military onslaught on Gaza. The Times of Israel reported: “The purpose of the march was passionately summed up in Bill Glied’s closing remarks: ‘Thank God for the IDF. Thank God for Israel. And remember together we must stand. Never again!’”

Despite shrill voices claiming otherwise, most objective evidence reveals anti-Semitism to be a mere shadow of its former oppressive character. (An example of this ‘if I scream loud enough people may believe me’ tactic, Toronto businessman and board member of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, Michael Diamond, wrote in the *Canadian Jewish News* last month that “we Jews are under siege right now – on campus, in Israel, in the media, even in our high schools and on the street.”)

Well, how does this compare to seven decades ago when “none is too many” was the order of the day in Ottawa, which rejected Jewish refugees escaping Nazi concentration camps. This hostile anti-Semitic climate continued into the 1950s with some neighborhoods excluding Jews from owning property through land covenants and institutions such as McGill University in Montreal imposing quotas on Jewish students.

Fortunately, Christianity’s decline, combined with a rise in anti-racist politics has significantly undercut anti-Semitism as a social force in Canada. Today, Jews are largely seen as “white” people. Canada’s Jewish community is well represented among institutions of influence in this country and there is very little in terms of structural racism against Jews (which is not to say there isn’t significant cultural stereotyping, which must be challenged). In fact, among elite business, political and professional circles Jewish representation far

surpasses their slim 1.3% of the Canadian population.

Canadian Jews are twice as likely as the general population to hold a bachelors degree and three times more likely to earn over \$75,000. In The Encyclopedia of the Jewish diaspora: origins, experiences, and culture Mark Avrum Ehrlich claims that a fifth of the wealthiest Canadians were Jewish and Toronto's Shalom Life reported that six of the 24 Canadians who made Forbes' 2011 list of global billionaires were Jewish.

Even the sad history of structural anti-Semitism in this country should be put into proper context. When Jewish immigrants were blocked from entering Canada so were most non-Europeans. Similarly, the land covenants that excluded Jewish property ownership usually took aim at other groups as well and throughout the university quota period few South Asians or blacks had any access to higher learning. During this period of institutional discrimination against Jews, Status Indians were unable to vote and the Indian Act prohibited First Nations from practicing their religious/cultural ceremonies (such as potlatches, pow-wows, sweat lodges and sun dances).

It would be disingenuous at best to claim anti-Semitism has or had anywhere near the effect of racism against First Nations or other people of colour in Canada.

A little over-zealous defence of one's own "tribe" could perhaps be forgiven, but not when accompanied by a ringing endorsement of the racist militarism sweeping Israeli society. Over the past two months the Israeli military has killed some 1,700 Palestinian civilians in Gaza and there has been an upsurge in racist outbursts targeting those seen as a threat to the Jewish character of the state (mostly Palestinian citizens of Israel but also African refugees and anti-Zionist Jews). One of the groups that organized the Toronto protest has long promoted Jewish/white supremacy in the Middle East. The Jewish National Fund may be the only openly racist registered charity operating in this country.

While it was made illegal to restrict the sale of property to certain ethnic or religious groups in Canada a half-century ago, the JNF does just that in Israel today. The JNF's bylaws and lease documents contain a restrictive covenant stating its property will not be leased to non-Jews. A 1998 United Nations Human Rights Council report found that the JNF systematically discriminates against Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up about 20 percent of the country's population. According to the UN report, JNF lands are "chartered to benefit Jews exclusively," which has led to an "institutionalized form of discrimination."

More recently, the US State Department's 2012 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices detailed "institutional and societal discrimination" in Israel. The report noted, "Approximately 93 percent of land was in the public domain, including approximately 12.5 percent owned by the NGO Jewish National Fund (JNF), whose statutes prohibit sale or lease of land to non-Jews."

In Israel, as in Canada, Jewish/white privilege is a much greater social problem than anti-Semitism. It's time to check that privilege.

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