

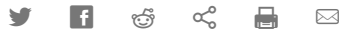


Analysis

Tories' extreme stand a bid for Jewish vote

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RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Joyce Bateman reacts to her supporters at her Corydon Ave headquarters on election night. [Photo Store](#)

As most of the crowd turned against her, Joyce Bateman's awkward smile melted away.

Bateman, the Conservative MP from Winnipeg South Centre who is running for re-election, was sitting onstage at the Asper Jewish Community Campus in Tuxedo for an all-candidates forum hosted by B'nai Brith.

Up until that point in the evening, the crowd of 100 or so had been exceedingly polite and well-behaved. Bateman and the other candidates -- Liberal Jim Carr, New Democrat Matt Henderson and Green party candidate Andrew Park -- had performed admirably, tackling questions about the movement to boycott Israel, domestic terrorist threats, re-establishing diplomatic relations with Iran, poverty and the economy.

It was all going well until Bateman piqued the ire of the crowd when she starting reading off a list of names from the Liberal campaign -- volunteers, paid staff workers and candidates alike -- who had been identified by the Tories as enemies of Israel.

As she got to Andrew Leslie -- the decorated retired lieutenant-general from the Canadian Armed Forces running for the Liberals in Ottawa-Orleans -- the crowd erupted with shouts of "shame." I, as the moderator, was forced at that point to step in to protect Bateman from the surging anger in the audience.

It is hard in retrospect to escape the feeling the "enemies of Israel" blacklist Bateman was reading had a McCarthyesque blush to it. The names were read quickly and without any information establishing the veracity of the charges against the individuals named. It was a truly creepy moment.

But to be fair, Bateman was only doing what she had been told to do. This was not an impetuous act; it was part of a carefully scripted strategy to use Israel as a wedge issue to capture majority support from Canadian Jews.

By now it has been well-established this Conservative government has adopted an extremely hard line in support of Israel. From our decision to end diplomatic relations with Iran, to labelling Canadian charities that do humanitarian work in Palestine as "terrorist organizations," Canada has become one of the most hawkish pro-Israel nations on the planet.

That is not at all surprising when you consider how important the Jewish vote has become to the Tories. The Jewish community is an extremely active political constituency deeply involved in all aspects of partisan politics. And in Canada, increasingly, that activism has been to the benefit of the Tories.

An Ipsos Reid exit poll conducted during the 2011 federal election estimated just over half of all Jewish voters supported the Tories. This marks a significant shift, as most Canadian Jews had a long tradition of supporting the Liberal party.

Although there are not many ridings in Canada where the Jewish vote alone could determine the outcome, it is a potent force in about a dozen seats, including Winnipeg South Centre. In 2011, Bateman beat Liberal Anita Neville by just over 700 votes. Although there are no firm numbers from that riding, both the Liberal and Tory camps firmly believe Bateman captured a majority of Jewish voters.

However, in its bid to connect with Jewish Canadians, the Tories have taken a pretty extreme stance. As Bateman demonstrated, the Tories are not satisfied to merely note the differences in policies between them and the NDP or Liberals; this party must label its political opponents as friends of terrorists and enemies of Israel. Even though this strategy lacks any empirical foundation or fairness, it is hard to ignore the fact it has been successful.

All this raises an important, and somewhat uncomfortable question: is the Conservative script on Israel and its relations with Canada an accurate reflection of Jewish sentiments?

"I think most Jewish Canadians would say that this kind of stuff doesn't apply to them," said Yoni Goldstein, editor of the Canadian Jewish News in Toronto. "Canadian Jews are definitely connected to Israel, but there is a huge diversity of opinion about what that means. And for some on the far right, this does resonate."

The Conservative party is far too deliberate and well-organized to do anything without a particular purpose or target audience. To that end, it's clear the Tories are reaching out to Jewish voters in a way they are not for other ethnic or religious groups. Consider that despite shunning most local candidate forums, Conservative candidates have appeared in all five of B'nai Brith's national debate series.

However, Goldstein said the sharp edge of the debate between Conservatives and the other parties on Israel and Jewish issues has made this arguably the most divisive and painful campaign ever for Canada's Jews. This has been particularly evident in the anger and contempt expressed between Jews on issues such as the Syrian refugee crisis.

Goldstein said many Jews see a parallel between the plight of Syrians now and European Jews in the 1930s and '40s who were turned away from countries such as Canada and the United States when they were fleeing the horror of Nazi Germany. To that end, Goldstein said many individual Jews and synagogues have been active in advocating for the admission of greater numbers of Syrian refugees and raising money to sponsor them upon arrival.

However, at the same time, there have been eruptions of anger and protest within the community.

"There was an incident here in Toronto where a group of Jews were protesting an event organized by other members of the community to raise money for the Liberals," Goldstein said. "I have never seen that kind of friction before. It's a sign that emotions are running higher in this campaign than ever before."

Goldstein said many Jews now believe regardless of the outcome, there must be efforts to bridge gaps in the community.

"I think the most important thing for Jewish Canadians will be, no matter who wins, finding a way to ensure that we're all working together after the election."

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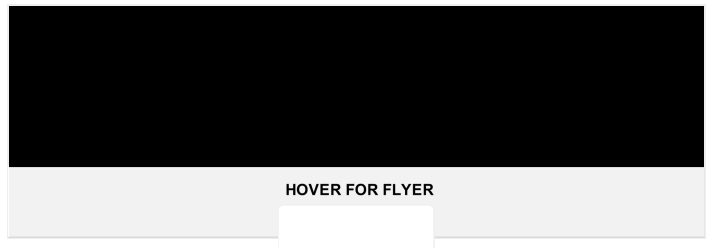
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