

Canada and the Quebec Referendum - 1995

Do not separate yourself from your community. (Hillel)

Issue

As Jews concerned for the welfare of our own communities, as well as society at large, we believe that the cause of social stability for which Canada is renowned and the pursuit of peace which has made Canada respected in the family of free nations are best served by unity and the spirit of mutual cooperation and cultural diversity.

Background

The growth of nationalism in Quebec has a long and complicated history. However, the real growth in the separatist movement in Quebec did not begin until more recent times. In 1968 a new political party was formed in the Province of Quebec, the Parti Quebecois, and in 1976 it won the provincial election. This party proposed the notion of sovereignty-association, a concept whereby Quebec would be granted sovereign powers but would still be a part of Canada. A referendum was held in 1980 on the issue of sovereignty-association and was defeated by a vote of 60% to 40%.

In 1982 the Constitution Act was passed by the federal government and signed by all provinces except Quebec. Up to this time the Canadian constitution had remained an act of the British parliament. From 1986 to 1990 many rounds of federal-provincial talks were unsuccessful in coming to some resolution whereby Quebec would become a signatory to the Constitution Act. In 1990 a new federal party was formed in Quebec, the Bloc Quebecois, whose principal mandate was to take Quebec out of confederation. In the 1993 federal election the Bloc Quebecois, under the leadership of Lucien Bouchard, became the official opposition in the Canadian parliament. In the fall of 1994 the provincial election in Quebec returned the Parti Quebecois to power. During the election campaign, Jacques Parizeau, leader of the Parti Quebecois, promised to hold a referendum on Quebec's future within 10 months of his election.

On October 30, 1995, citizens of the Province of Quebec voted in a referendum that asked them whether they agreed that Quebec should become sovereign. The referendum was narrowly defeated by a vote of 50.6% to 49.4%. The emotional arguments leading up to the referendum and the close vote itself filled Canadians with great anguish and led them and their leaders to reflect on their country, its structure and its values and the changes that must be made if the country is to remain intact. The results have been widely interpreted as a mandate for change within the country.

Canada is a major trading partner of the United States and changes in its federation could prove a serious disadvantage to the United States and Canada.

Throughout their long history Jews have known the reality of being a distinct society living within a majority culture. Experience has taught them that societies are enriched by diversity, as Jews have so often enriched the societies in which they have lived.

Resolution

We, Women of Reform Judaism:

- 1) Support our Canadian member sisterhoods and join with them in their desire for a united Canada.
- 2) Call upon our Canadian affiliates to take active roles in appropriate discussions on Canadian unity.

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