

Virtual Reality Comes to Canadian Jewry: The Case of the Canadian Jewish Congress Plenary

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This article deals with the issue of the changing nature of the "public square" of contemporary Jewry through an account of the Canadian Jewish Congress Plenary Assembly in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1998. The CJC Plenary has historically been, par excellence, Canadian Jewry's "public square." The program of the 1998 Plenary differed from that of previous Plenaries in that a major portion of the event's schedule was shifted from "traditional" activities, such as speeches and resolutions, to a "talk show" format of sessions on issues of contemporary Jewish concern. This major shift in format raises questions - most particularly that of the control of public discourse in the Jewish polity.

The Electronic Age and the Jews

It is at this point practically a given that the world as a whole, in these latter days of the twentieth century, is undergoing a profound revolution in communications.¹ The mantras of this revolution include the phrases "new world order," "global village," and "virtual reality." The steady progress of electronic media, and particularly the spectacular intrusion of the Internet and all of its possibilities on the consciousness of the public in general has begun to markedly affect all aspects of education and public discourse, not least in the political sphere. The process of change in this sphere is only beginning. If the age-old rule of thumb that whatever is going on in the world at large impacts on the Jews has any validity, then the advent of the global village and virtual reality on World Jewry will have important effects on the ways Jews communicate with one another as well as the ways in which the Jewish community's public business is conducted. In fact observers are beginning to openly question the relevance of traditional Jewish organizations and ways of getting things done in light of the changing times. A particularly interesting concrete example of this process and its effects can be seen in the Canadian Jewish community with respect to one of its foremost institutions, the Canadian Jewish Congress, and that institution's foremost gathering, the National Plenary Assembly.

The Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC)

In theory, the CJC exists as the unified representative body of Canadian Jewry.² As Daniel Elazar notes, it represents a distinctly Canadian orientation toward a comprehensive organization reflecting all aspects of Canadian Jewish communal life in its constitution.³ From its founding in 1919 it has adumbrated the voice of Canadian Jewry and, indeed, it could even be said to have established the concept of a united, Canada-wide Jewish community in a period in which Canada itself was in the process of finding its

independent voice in the world.⁴ Though the CJC lapsed organizationally shortly after its founding, the challenges of the 1930s caused its reestablishment in 1934. Since that time, CJC has enjoyed institutional continuity and considerable renown both within Canada and on the World Jewish scene. It is widely regarded, both inside and outside the organization, as the "Parliament of Canadian Jewry" and as that community's public face in general Canadian society and politics and beyond. Thus Goldie Hershon, the past president of the CJC, emphasized, in an interview marking the end of her mandate, the extent to which CJC commanded respect as a N.G.O. even at the international level.

In consonance with that perceived mandate, the organization has taken upon itself the responsibility to set public policy for the Canadian Jewish community and to represent that communal policy to the Canadian government and to other individuals and institutions in Canada and abroad. That mandate and responsibility mean that the setting of CJC policy is a process with serious political implications.⁵

How is this public policy determined? The CJC's constitution specifies that ultimate authority for the determination of CJC policy is vested in a National Plenary Convention, held every three years. Thus the Plenary, at least in theory, possesses enormous power to shape the public agenda of the Canadian Jewish community. This normative understanding of the nature of the CJC Plenary is reflected in a recent press report that "The Congress holds a plenary assembly every three years to elect new directors and establish policy through resolutions."⁶ The theory thus mandates the adoption of community policy through open and public debate. In any attempt to take the pulse of the "public square" of the Canadian Jewish community, then, the state of the CJC Plenary must needs be examined. This presentation will be my attempt, as a participant-observer who attended the last two CJC Plenary assemblies as an accredited delegate, to understand the dynamic of the latest CJC Plenary, held in Winnipeg, Manitoba on May 24-25, 1998. Through this, I hope to achieve a greater understanding of the current dynamics of the Canadian Jewish "public square."

Declining Importance of the CJC

While in theory the CJC speaks for all Canadian Jews, in truth, it has never been the sole organization which has sought to speak for the Canadian Jewish community on public issues. From its inception, it had an overt rival in the Canadian Zionist Federation⁷ and, later, in the Canada-Israel Committee with respect to Canada's relations with Israel. It also faced, and still faces a determined attempt by B'nai B'rith Canada and its subsidiary League for Human Rights to speak for the community, particularly with respect to issues of racism and anti-Semitism. This rivalry is immediately evident in B'nai B'rith's 1993 mission statement, which certainly bespeaks a comprehensive communal programme:

B'nai B'rith Canada brings men and women of the Jewish faith together in fellowship to serve the Jewish community through combatting anti-semitism, bigotry and racism in Canada and abroad; carrying out and supporting activities which ensure the security and

survival of the State of Israel and Jewish communities worldwide; community service through various volunteer activities, cultivation of leadership, charitable work, advocacy and government relations.⁸

More importantly, CJC has also recently experienced a significant behind-the-scenes challenge from an organization called Federation/UIA Canada. This organization, which is the result of an amalgamation between CJF Canada and UIA Canada, represents the collectivity of Jewish community federations across Canada with their powerful fundraising apparatus. The power of this organization's position can be illustrated by an examination of the case of the Canada-Israel Committee, a Canadian Jewish pro-Israel lobbying group. Originally the Committee was sponsored by and accountable to what its constitutional document referred to as the "principal organizations" of the Canadian Jewish community. These organizations originally included the three major national Jewish organizations, Canadian Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith Canada, and the Canadian Zionist Federation, as well as the Jewish community Federations of Montreal and Toronto and the United Israel Appeal Canada. As of 1994, however, the Canada-Israel Committee became accountable solely to the Council of Jewish Federations Canada.⁹ Federation/UIA Canada has also become, through its National Budgeting Committee, the prime source of funding for CJC. As always the power to fund constitutes real power which Federation/UIA Canada has chosen to use. Through its budgetary process, it has succeeded in reducing the CJC's budget significantly. Thus, in the past six years, CJC's budget has been cut from approximately \$CDN 3.7 million to less than \$CDN 3.0 million. The result has been that the organization has been required to curtail a number of its activities and has further practically not been able to take any significant action without prior consideration of the position of the Federations on the relevant issues. Thus the CJC's latest Treasurer's report clearly states that, "The financial predicament in which we found ourselves over the past three years has continued to put tremendous pressure on our staff and has been the cause of certain programs to be eliminated or severely curtailed."¹⁰ This, in brief, was the situation of CJC coming into its 1998 Plenary. It faced many important issues, not least among them the virtual abandonment of its headquarters building in Montréal and a general sense among the Canadian Jewish public at large that its stature had become significantly diminished.

Staging a Plenary

On May 24-25, 1998, CJC held its twenty-fifth Plenary Assembly in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It marked the first time that CJC had held a Plenary outside the two major Canadian Jewish communities of Montréal and Toronto. The previous Plenary, held in Montréal in 1995, had been marked by considerable controversy and a hotly contested race for the organization's presidency.¹¹ Whether on purpose or not, the 1998 Plenary would see a decided deemphasis on anything remotely resembling internal controversy. There were, first of all, no contested elections for officers. Perhaps partly for that reason, the length of the Plenary was cut from an originally-planned three to two days.

The annual business meeting, which constitutes another potential source of public organizational conflict, was allotted no more than one hour of time and was held in a small

conference room that barely held the approximately 100 delegates attending the meeting. No written agenda was prepared for the meeting, which was promptly cut off at the one hour mark so that a video could be shown in the same room. There was thus little time or scope allowed for public discussion of the important organizational and existential questions facing the CJC. The sole remaining "unscripted" time in which delegates would have the opportunity of expressing themselves on the public issues facing the CJC and the Canadian Jewish community as a whole was the session on resolutions.

The session dealing with resolutions was similarly allocated a set time, two hours, which was not ultimately extensible. In that time, some thirty-six resolutions which had previously been submitted to the Resolutions Committee, on topics ranging from Social Justice to Community Relations to CJC Infrastructure were to be discussed. In a vain effort to streamline proceedings, the Resolutions Committee had attempted, prior to the Plenary, to limit the number and length of resolutions brought forward. At the resolutions session, the chair announced that she would recognize only one pro and one con speaker per resolution, even though the rules for debate, as established in the official Resolutions' booklet, envisioned as many as three speakers pro and three con.¹² Despite, and, possibly partially because of this attempt at limiting debate, there was much procedural confusion and in the end the "Parliament of Canadian Jewry" got to discuss only 11 of 16 pages of resolutions, with the remainder, including those resolutions dealing with CJC's status and structure, referred for ultimate disposal to CJC's regional councils. At that, the session seemed to have gone marginally better than the resolutions session at the 1995 Plenary in Montreal, which also did not have the time to discuss all the resolutions presented and which disposed of the undebated resolutions in a similar manner. However such is the power of the normative version of public adoption of policy in the CJC that Canada's preeminent newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, reported that "about 500 delegates to the CJC meeting formally endorsed the Calgary declaration on national unity."¹³ Had there been five hundred delegates at the Plenary, they would have doubtlessly voted for that resolution. In the event, however, less than one hundred delegates were present at the resolutions session to formally ratify anything.

In sum, those elements of the Plenary programme designed to discuss CJC policy in a public way were most decidedly deemphasized. That part of the Canadian Jewish public square had most assuredly shrunk in size and significance.

The Plenary as Talk Show

If, then, deliberation on the CJC's policy, which was the ostensible purpose of the gathering, was deemphasized, what was the main thrust of the Plenary? In terms of emphasis, both in time and effort, it has to be said that the Plenary essentially became an excuse to stage a talk show. The first real indication of the nature of this emphasis came at the first luncheon, where customary speeches and award ceremonies were cut short so that the body of delegates could proceed in a timely manner to a spacious auditorium. In that place, which could easily hold the hundreds attending, the delegates would play studio audience for a series of talk shows lasting fully six hours over the two days of the

conference.

Staging for the shows was influenced by the format of contemporary television talk shows for a very good reason. The shows were videotaped by Videon, a Winnipeg Cable Channel for actual broadcast in Winnipeg and for eventual distribution across Canada. The host was Jim Carr, a Manitoba politician. He was in control of the various elements that made for a successful talk show. On the stage, for each of the six hour-long telecasts, were two "anchors" and two or three "panelists."¹⁴ Each of the "anchors" was expected to discuss each of the topics and provide general expertise as well as a certain continuity. Two or three panelists added to the mix expertise specific to the subject at hand. Each person on stage was given a chance to make a presentation lasting three to five minutes and to react to the other panel presentations. Then Carr went into the audience where the people attending the Plenary, warming to their role, engaged the host, the panel and each other on the set topics. For the purposes of the talk show, there was no differentiation made between voting delegates and others; that was a detail that mattered only with respect to the deemphasized "traditional" aspects of the Plenary.

Toward the beginning of the first televised session, Carr stated that "the imperative of T.V. is beyond our control." This statement indicates in effect that the media constraints that mandate that information be conveyed in relatively short "soundbites" carried the day. So, in contrast with the non-televised sessions, panelist speeches were short and the audience participation became an essential element in the program rather than an appendage, as in traditional podium speeches.

There were also two non-televised sessions on the programme. Though these sessions, on Canadian National Unity and Dialogue between Jews and Evangelical Christians, were of considerable intrinsic importance and topicality and both were reported in the press,¹⁵ the *Canadian Jewish News* reporter covering the Plenary gave them diminished status. They constituted an addendum to what was for him main story on the Plenary proceedings: the televised sessions.¹⁶

There were other important aspects to the talk show presentation. It is, perhaps, significant that in five of the six sessions, one of the five or six people on stage was a woman. This meant that care was taken to include at least one female at each session, but only in the session on "The Clash of Tradition and Technology" was there more than one. In any Canadian gathering, the issue of language can never be ignored. For the most part, one of Canada's two official languages, French, was conspicuous by its relative absence from the Plenary. Though the CJC and its printed programme are officially bilingual, The only exceptions to an all English Plenary were some remarks by the representative of the Canadian government, Dr. Hedy Fry, Secretary of State for Multiculturalism, and by Max Bernard, of Montréal, speaking on National Unity. Perhaps significantly, neither expression of French was in one of the televised sessions where a second language of expression would likely have been an unwanted distraction.

Topics for the six televised hours included many issues of key interest to those interested in contemporary Jewry: Jewish Continuity, Prosecution of War Criminals and the Issue of

Financial Restitution, Issues Dividing Israel and the Diaspora, What is the Future of CJC and Other Jewish Institutions?, the Clash of Tradition and Technology, and What is Jewish? As might have been expected, a studio audience selected for its interest in Jewish affairs reacted with great enthusiasm to the opportunity to speak to the various subjects, expressing a wide range of opinions with the audience indicating its approval of a given opinion by its applause.

Several times during the course of the six sessions, Jim Carr stated that Winnipeg was the capital of the Jewish world. This statement may have been made somewhat tongue in cheek, but nonetheless reflects a serious truth. Any person viewing the show on television would not necessarily care whether the program emanated from Winnipeg or New York or Jerusalem. Furthermore, the dynamic emerging from the talk show format means that leadership in the Jewish polity, as in the general community, is vested in those who control the media of communication in the most effective way. One of the anchors, Elan Steinberg, Executive Director of the World Jewish Congress, could only agree. Though he remarked that he had never seen such a program before, he clearly was impressed by its potential. The power of television, he stated, is such that Winnipeg *could* become the center of Jewish communal life, at least in virtual reality .

If the Medium is the Message, Then What is the Message?

It was a Canadian scholar, Marshall McLuhan, who bequeathed to the world the epigram "the medium is the message."¹⁷ I believe that any analysis of the 1998 CJC Plenary has to proceed from that starting point. The Plenary was, as its chair, Israel Ludwig, stated, "a top quality product." His hope that the product would "encourage an atmosphere of participation and dialogue"¹⁸ seems to have been largely borne out by the result, with which the CJC leadership was clearly pleased. But the "product" of the Winnipeg Plenary was decidedly different from normative, traditional expectations of a CJC Plenary. The elements of the programme that, in a formal sense, have made the CJC the parliament of Canadian Jewry became palpably vestigial at the 1998 Plenary. That does not mean, however, that CJC as a major element in the Canadian Jewish public square has been eliminated. Rather the Plenary illustrates the changing nature of the public square of post-modernity and its impact on the Canadian Jewish community.

The theme of the 1998 Winnipeg Plenary was "Jewish Roots Meet 21st Century Realities." The reality of the Canadian Jewish community on the cusp of the twenty-first century is that it is united, if at all, as a "virtual" community. It is a community both glued to and by the media which is evolving new ways and means of communication and public discourse.

These new ways have their effect on the institutions which attempt to represent the community. The *Canadian Jewish News*, Canada's national Jewish newspaper, printed an editorial on the occasion of the Plenary which incisively stated that the CJC "is as close to a 'parliament' of Canada's Jewish communities as today's communal organizational realities allow."¹⁹ In light of the present analysis one can only agree. Organizational realities are changing before our eyes. There is a consensus among observers of public institutions that televising proceedings changes the way things are done. Certainly, for example,

people watching the Canadian political scene are agreed that the Canadian House of Commons, once the sessions were televised, became a palpably different place. Just so, as the definition of public square changes, Jewish communal organizations and their public discourse will find themselves in an evolutionary process and will be presenting themselves differently to a public with different and evolving expectations. A milestone in this process of transmogrification of the Jewish public square is the 1998 CJC Plenary. As Elan Steinberg observed, the change in medium has extended the range of public Jewish discourse. Does this mean that setting public policy by formal resolution is becoming vestigial? What does seem beyond dispute is that the media for public discourse within the Jewish community are in a process of change. Ultimately, if the new face of Jewish public discourse is to be the talk show, with all its potential and all its limitations, then the question of who controls the public discourse in the Jewish polity and, hence, sets policy for the Jewish community has to be asked in significantly new ways.

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Notes

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1. Researchers in the field of communications have noted that the role of mass media in the development of religious and ethnic communities has received only superficial attention from scholars even though it is clear that "worldviews are created and sustained in ongoing social processes in which information is shared." See Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum, *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 5, 7-8.

2. See Daniel Elazar and Harold Waller, *Maintaining Consensus: The Canadian Jewish Polity in the Postwar World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), p. 42ff. Despite its recognized prominence in the life of the Canadian Jewish community, or perhaps precisely because of it, CJC has not yet received an adequate historical study. For a guide to current scholarship on Canadian Jewry, see Ira Robinson, "Canada," in Michael Terry, ed., *Reader's Guide to Judaism* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, forthcoming).

3. Daniel J. Elazar, "Constitutional Documents," in Daniel J. Elazar, Jonathan Sarna, and Rela G. Monson eds., *A Double Bond: The Constitutional Documents of American Jewry* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), p. 31.

4. World War I is widely seen by historians as a watershed in Canada's process of achieving full juridical independence from Great Britain.

5. Goldie Hershon, the previous CJC president, has remarked on the extent to which CJC has commanded respect, even on the international level. See David Lazarus, "Hershon Reflects on Her Term as CJC President," *Canadian Jewish News [CJN]*, May 21, 1998, p. 24.
6. "Jewish Congress has New Leader," *The Gazette* (Montreal), May 25, 1998. 7. See H.M. Caiserman, "The Canadian Jewish Congress," in Arthur Daniel Hart, ed., *The Jew in Canada: A Complete History of Canadian Jewry from the Days of the French Regime to the Present Time* (Toronto, 1926), pp. 468-469.
8. B'nai B'rith Canada District #22 *By-Laws* (July 1993), p. 1.
9. Council of Jewish Federations Canada, Constitution of the Canada-Israel Committee, Draft, May 4, 1994, 1 "Composition."
10. "Canadian Jewish Congress Treasurer's Report for the period July 1, 1994 to June 30, 1997" (May 1998), p. 1.
11. Cf. Janice Arnold, "Hershon Wins," *CJN*, May 18 and 25, 1995.
12. "1998 Plenary Resolutions: Procedural Guidelines," rule number 6.
13. David Roberts, "CJC and Natives Join Hands to Promote Unity," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), May 26, 1998. For another report of the resolutions proceedings, see Myron Love, "CJC Resolved That...", *CJN*, June 4, 1998, p. 21.
14. It is interesting and, perhaps, significant that while men and women were present in the panels in all sessions, in five of the six televised sessions only one of the five or six people on stage was a woman.
15. Linda Rosborough, "Church's Call to Halt Converting Jews Runs into Opposition," *Winnipeg Free Press*, May 26, 1998, p. A7. Cf. also David Robert's article cited in note 13 above.
16. Myron Love, "Interactive Discussion Lets Audience Participate," *CJN*, June 4, 1998, p. 22.
17. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York, 1967).
18. Israel Ludwig and Larry Hurtig, "Welcome," "25th Plenary Assembly Program Book."
19. "CJC's 25th Plenary," *CJN*, May 21, 1998, p. 8.

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