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CIJA spokesman Steve McDonald gives effective tips how to advocate for Israel

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By BERNIE BELLAN Steve McDonald is the young Associate Director of Communications for CIJA (The Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs), which is the umbrella organization representing all Canadian Jewish federations.

Although I've spoken with Steve many times – and have carried several columns written by him over the years, it was only quite recently that I had the chance to meet with him personally.

The occasion was a meeting of the Israel Advocacy group that has recently formed in Winnipeg and which has been meeting in the home

of Bradley Pollock and Yolanda Pipini-Pollock. We've carried several reports in the paper about this new group and, as word spreads of the interesting and useful activities in which it is now engaged, more Winnipeggers – including a fair number of non-Jews, have been attending the group's meetings and have been volunteering for some of the committees that have now been formed.

As for Steve McDonald, he was in Winnipeg the weekend of January 10-11, both to speak to members of the Israel Advocacy group and to attend a Hillel student retreat. When I introduced myself to him, I said to him: "You look so young."

McDonald responded: "How old do you think I am?"

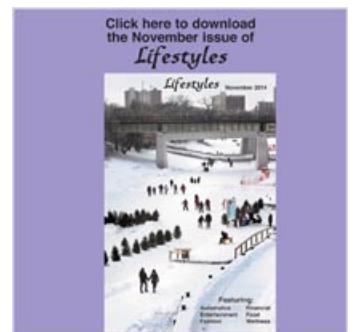
I said: "33".

He said: "Close, I'm 32, but my birthday is coming up." (McDonald suggested I could have another career working in fairs guessing ages.)

The reason I bring up McDonald's age though, is that despite his relative youth, he's a very experienced lobbyist and political operator, having been doing that in one form or another in both Ottawa and Toronto for over ten years. And, as I sat listening to him give a quite polished presentation during which he listed several very useful points how Jews (and non-Jews) can make a solid case for Israel, I realized that McDonald is one of the bright young minds who will form the next generation of leadership within the Jewish community. (McDonald, by the way, is a convert to Judaism – in case you were wondering about his non-Jewish sounding name.)

It also occurred to me that, after having recently met Michael Mostyn, the new CEO of B'nai Brith Canada, who is also relatively young (40), the new generation of leadership within the Jewish community has a perspective that is somewhat different from the older generation. Both Mostyn and McDonald are well aware of the mistakes that have been made by Jewish organizations in communicating with both the non-Jewish and Jewish communities. They both served as lobbyists for their respective organizations

כ"ב בשבט תשע"ה
 20th of Sh'vat, 5775



on Parliament Hill and they are both fully conversant with effective lobbying techniques, including understanding the positions of adversaries and engaging those adversaries in dialogue at times.

McDonald is also the “go-to” guy for CIJA when it comes to dealing with the media and can often be seen on national television. In introducing him, Bradley Pollock noted that the Hill Times, which is an independent newspaper focusing on federal politics, named McDonald one of the “top 100” lobbyists working on Parliament Hill.

During the course of his remarks McDonald enumerated a series of points that he suggested anyone interested in advocating on behalf of Israel should bear in mind. Some of those points, in fact, might go against the grain of what supporters of Israel might normally consider to be effective advocacy.

For instance, McDonald said that “as a community we often get into what I call ‘lawyer mode’”, i.e. “We think that it’s all about the facts” as we make a “legal” case for Israel.” Also, “if we can only get people to appreciate how much we care for Israel, they’ll be on our side.”

The truth, McDonald suggested, is that very few Canadians are either interested in what goes on in the Middle East or have any knowledge of that area. Further, “Middle East stories are of very little interest to the media.”

Rather than regarding issues that have anything to do with Israel as of urgent importance to the wider community, McDonald suggested Israel advocates should “think of those issues as an ‘out-of-body experience’”, i.e. detach yourself from the pro-Israel perspective and try to think how those issues would be perceived by the average Canadian.

“The real challenge we have is that the overwhelming majority of Canadians say Canada should be neutral in this conflict”, McDonald noted. “Canada should take no position” when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is what most Canadians would say.

While “25 percent” of Canadians say Canada should “support Israel” and a “smaller proportion” say Canada should support the Palestinians, “66 percent” of Canadians say Canada should not take sides. “The majority of Canadians identify with neither side,” McDonald said. “They think both are the same.”

In fact there is a high level of ignorance when it comes to the average Canadian’s knowledge about Israel, he added. In a study done by CIJA’s predecessor organization (the Canada-Israel Committee), it was found that most Canadians didn’t even realize that Israel was a democracy, never mind the fact that is the only liberal middle democracy in the entire Middle East.

Putting it simply, McDonald said that the average Canadian’s attitude is: “These guys are never going to make peace, so why should I care?” He added that most Canadians would say: “I don’t have any skin in the game.”

Yet, there are ways that Israel advocates can influence those Canadians who are in what McDonald described as the “moveable middle”. Foremost among those ways is to explain that Canadians and Israelis have “shared values”, such as “love of peace, democracy, family, and freedom.”

“They want everything you want for your kids,” is how McDonald put it in attempting to show how one might be able to get someone who is relatively unaware of what Israelis want understand the situation better.

“You can connect with people in a way that can humanize Israel,” he suggested.

Turning to the BDS movement (Boycott, Divest, Sanctions), McDonald was relatively dismissive of that movement’s potential to inflict much damage on Israel: “If Israel wasn’t defeated by the Arab boycott of the 1950s and 60s, it’s not going to be defeated by the BDS movement,” he suggested.

But, in order to counter the BDS movement, it is of vital importance that Israeli institutions of higher learning continue to forge increased ties with Canadian counterpart institutions, McDonald said. “Every time an Israeli university forges an agreement with a Canadian university, they (the proponents of BDS) hate it.”

Does it really matter in the long run whether a relatively small country such as Canada supports Israel, McDonald asked rhetorically.

In fact, “Canada does play an important role on the world stage,” he argued. “That’s what this conflict is all about: Trying to isolate Israel.”

It may not be readily apparent to Canadian Jews right now what the dangers are of isolating Israel, McDonald suggested, but “I have a young daughter,” he added. “When she’s in university and wants to serve on a committee of some sort,” if the move to isolate Israel continues, there is a good possibility that she’ll be told she can’t “serve on that committee because she’s a Zionist.”



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McDonald proceeded to offer a series of useful and concise tips to anyone who is interested in advocating on behalf of Israel:

- “Don’t feed into the complexity of the situation”; that would only make it more difficult for the average Canadian to understand.
- “We need to take the other side’s arguments off the table.” Agree that Palestinians deserve a “democracy”. “What they don’t deserve is Hamas.”
- Acknowledge the legitimacy of some Palestinian grievances.
- Say that it’s “not about taking sides”. “Also, the argument that the other side shot first doesn’t work.”
- “If our first response to Palestinian suffering isn’t empathy, we lose.”
- Point out that Israel did withdraw from Gaza and has always accepted ceasefires.
- Finally, “when you’re having a conversation with someone about Israel, have a real conversation. Never defend the indefensible, i.e. settlements.”

McDonald went on to use the argument over climate change as an example of how to make the case for Israel. If you’re arguing with someone who denies there is any such thing as climate change, McDonald suggested, rather than attempting to marshal arguments proving that climate change is real, ask that individual or group to provide evidence that climate change isn’t happening.

“At the end of the day, “ however, McDonald conceded, “facts don’t make a difference...People think and make decisions on a really gut level.”

There are many positive aspects to Israel’s image in Canada though, and McDonald suggested that Israel advocates should concentrate on strengthening the ties that already exist between Israelis and Canadians. He noted that the two countries already engage in over \$1 billion worth of trade each year – something that has been steadily growing.

“We should get Canadians to buy Israeli products,” he said (something that is a key aim of the new Israel Advocacy group. We have already listed several Winnipeg stores that carry Israeli products in this newspaper and will continue to add to that list in coming issues.)

As far as the media’s reporting on Israel is concerned, McDonald noted many of the problems that have been pointed out repeatedly by Israel’s defenders – and which were noted previously, such a relative lack of interest by most media in the Middle East and the determination to remain “balanced” in their coverage.

Still, he conceded that there is a disagreement within Jewish organizations how best to approach the media when it comes to concerns over perceived “bias”. “Some want to inundate the media with letters,” he noted. But, “if you use a hammer every time” to make a point, “you lose credibility, McDonald warned.

“You also want to give them (the media) carrots, not just sticks.” (On a personal note, I’ve been making the point to as many people as I can that the Winnipeg Free Press is unlikely to print the vast majority of letters that paper might receive from advocates for Israel and, even when a letter is printed, you can be sure it will be balanced by a letter that is equally critical of Israel.)

One of the most effective ways that CIJA has found in providing media with a point of view that can’t simply be dismissed as pro-Israel lobbying is by having experienced military personnel, for instance, explain how Hamas is committing “war crimes” by firing rockets at Israeli civilians. It’s always more effective having someone advocate your position when that person has no perceived or inherent interest in advancing a particular argument.

Further, it is important to attempt to reach out to such groups as unions and churches and relate to them “as fellow Canadians...and find a way of bringing them into the conversation.”

No matter all the positive actions that one might be able to take in making the case for Israel, however, McDonald did inject a salutary note when it comes to advocating for Israel at certain times, such as the recent “Operation Protective Edge”: “There’s very little we can do to humanize Israel during a time of conflict. The work goes on between conflicts.”

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