

THE CANADIAN BAHAI COMMUNITY'S

BRIEF

to

The Special Parliamentary Committee on the
Participation of the Visible Minorities in Canada

National Spiritual Assembly
of the Baha'is of Canada

November 28, 1983

Note: Included with this "Brief" were several accompanying documents, A Violence Free Society by Dr. Hossain Danesh, several submissions of the Baha'i International Community to various United Nations agencies on the question of human rights and minorities, and an article taken from the publication Refuge describing the Iranian Baha'i refugee program.

**Submission to the Special Parliamentary Committee
on the
Participation of Visible Minorities**

The work of the Special Parliamentary Committee on the Participation of Visible Minorities is of the highest importance. We have felt moved to make this submission not only because the Canadian Baha'i community feels this so strongly and wishes to contribute to its efforts, but also in view of the generous support and encouragement given us by the Canadian Government and several of its agencies in the recent past.

Although the Canadian Baha'i community is relatively small, Canada's Parliament recognized the institutions of our Faith by a formal Act (in 1949), the first sovereign legislature in the world to do so. Through a series of initiatives by Parliament and by several departments of government, Canada has been a leader in the international response to the tragic persecutions which our sister community in Iran is presently suffering. Canada is, for instance, far ahead of any other nation in the generous arrangements it has made to create a refuge for Iranian Baha'is made homeless by the persecutions.

Canada's Record

But beyond the experience of our own community, the record of Canada, by any international standard, is remarkable. The recently-enacted Charter of Rights and Freedoms gives legal force to universal ideals which are as yet without judicial or legislative force in most other countries of the world. The announcement in 1971, of the Multiculturalism Policy, represented another measure designed to guarantee the maintenance of the rich cultural and ethnic heritage of Canada's minorities while assisting in the successive elimination of barriers preventing their full participation in Canadian society. On the international level, Canada has signed more international human rights accords than any other nation.¹ The favourable position

Canada has achieved can, if properly understood and extended, provide the momentum necessary for further progress in advancing the level of minority participation in Canadian society.

Canada's past achievements can be appreciated further if examined in the light of the present trend towards increasing global interdependence and an understanding of the oneness of mankind. Most thoughtful people recognize that mankind is moving toward the creation of a single global society. The keynote of the process is the organic principle of unity in diversity. For Baha'is, this principle is explicit in the teachings of our Faith, and is the working force in the building of our community. Clearly, it is also the distinguishing characteristic of those nations which today represent the leading edge of social evolution. Of no society on earth is this more true than it is of Canada. From the beginning, this country has been guided by a willingness to accept cultural and linguistic variety.

Unity in Diversity

Given the national, cultural and linguistic diversity of the world, the achievement of global unity will be possible only if it is conceived of as an organic process and approached in this light. Rather than conformity or a standardization of cultural, racial, or national identities, Baha'is believe that unity can only be established if the uniqueness and value of each particular culture is upheld, defended and given the utmost respect.

"Consider the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty...This diversity, this difference is like naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole....In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament

and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest."²

"The diversity in the human family should be the cause of love and harmony, as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect chord. If you meet those of a different race and colour from yourself, do not mistrust them and withdraw yourself into your shell of conventionality, but rather be glad and show them kindness."³

A major obstacle to the elimination of those prejudices which stand in the way of unity in diversity is the widespread and largely unchallenged doctrine of materialism. This pervasive and dogmatic system of thought equates man with his material nature. Expressed in a brutal and self-righteous political ideology in one part of the world, and held up as the touchstone of human happiness in our own, the belief that man is measured by his material aspect reinforces a standardization and conformity to majority and dominant cultural patterns. Recognition of the spiritual reality of man is vital to the elimination of prejudice. The acquisition of spiritual qualities of mercy, tolerance, honesty, trustworthiness, compassion, love, and the knowledge of the fundamental worth of the human soul, whatever the accidents of culture, temperament or birth, provide the necessary framework within which prejudice can be removed and unity in diversity fostered.

Baha'is believe that the recognition of the oneness of mankind and the spiritual nature of man represent the foundation for effective human endeavour in this age. These two principles furnish the orientation and perspective required to generate policy and educational programs which can advance the participation of Canada's minorities.

"All men are the leaves and fruit of one same tree...They all have the same origin. The same rain has fallen upon them all, the same sun makes them grow, they are all refreshed by the same breeze...As the Holy Writings tell us, all men are equal before God."⁴

National Conference on Education

In order to overcome those attitudes and practices, legacies of a past age, that were well publicized in the survey which prompted Parliament to establish your Special Committee, deliberate efforts must be taken to develop educational programs which promote an understanding of the unity of the human family and an appreciation of man's spiritual nature. For this reason we would like to recommend the holding of a national conference on education to consider how this principle of the oneness of humanity can take a more central place in the different educational programs of our schools and universities, in the business world, through the media, in formal and nonformal education, whether for children, youth or adults. Such a national conference should include on its agenda consideration of several related issues: the nature of the evolving global society; cultural identity, its importance and value; the important role immigrants play in the national and world community; the value and cultural wealth of the world's indigenous peoples; the equality of rights of men and women; participation of the minorities in business and the professions. "Societal education", in the words of the Club of Rome, represents, we believe, the most effective long-term means of establishing justice and equity for the participation of the visible minority in Canada.

We also feel that the development of such a program of education must take into consideration the spiritual nature of man. The removal of divisive prejudices depends upon the knowledge of the oneness of mankind, the appreciation of diversity, as well as the development of spiritual qualities permitting social and public expression of such understanding.

Experiences of the Canadian Baha'i Community

As evidence of the feasibility of these principles and the vital role education can play, we would like to draw your Committee's attention to a number of experiments which we have undertaken in the Canadian Baha'i community. These programs have relied directly on the teachings outlined above. Naturally, we are far from having completed our application of

these principles, nor can we claim to have understood them as fully as we might. We have approached this work in a spirit of experimentation; all our efforts are viewed as a series of "workshops" designed to test and initiate and progressively master a process of social learning.

Before describing specific aspects of that experience related to minority participation, we want to register our conviction that a just and equitable level of participation of the visible minorities in Canada presupposes adjustments in two other fundamental areas. We believe that a more balanced and integrated relationship between Canada's francophone and anglophone population, and an advance in the role and status of women are necessary if the interests and rights of Canada's minorities are to be promoted and safeguarded.

Despite our meagre resources, it has been a deliberate policy of the Canadian Baha'i community to devote large portions of our funds, time and energy to create a community which favours participation and contributions from French Canadians. Translation of our publications, the costly provision of translation at our national conferences and conventions, encouragement given members of the community to learn both French and English, the policy of appointing French Canadians to our committees and other agencies in numbers which go beyond their representation in the community, are some of the ways we are attempting to raise the level of French Canadian participation.

With respect to women, the teachings of our Faith are clear. "The world of humanity has two wings - the one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly."⁵ So important is this principle that our teachings go further and point out that in the case where a family does not have the resources to provide for the education of both a son and a daughter, the daughter should be preferred and receive the necessary support to continue her education. In the Canadian Baha'i community our efforts to put this principle into practice has meant that women are elected to our national and local executive bodies, and are appointed to national committees and agencies in

numbers at least as great as men. We emphasize the principle of the equality of rights and opportunities for women, and the necessity of establishing opportunities for French Canadians because these efforts provide the larger framework of our deliberate plans to change the past and create conditions in which oppressed segments of society receive special attention and opportunities in order to overcome the disadvantages of the centuries.

Turning to our experiences with the visible minorities, two programs may especially interest your committee: one related to native Canadians, the other, to Canada's immigrants. It probably need not be said that these groups represent resources of enormous significance as global interdependence makes Canada's relationships with the homelands of these immigrants vital and, as the huge indigenous populations of the world, especially in those countries where they constitute the majority, come to play an increasingly significant role in the evolution of human society.

Although the majority of Canadian Baha'is are drawn from typical anglophone and francophone backgrounds of European origin one fifth of our members are native Canadians who are making a unique impact on the character and nature of our community. The experiences of non-native, urban and rural Canadians coming to know their fellow citizens from the many different native reserves and settlements in this country has been a creative and happy experience, though not without many tests and difficulties for both native and non-native, as might be expected. Throughout Canada we have established a variety of events: "unity gatherings", "native councils", "summer and winter schools", "unity feasts", and conferences, all of which have served to bring together in social and administrative activity anglophone, francophone, and native Canadians. At times it has been necessary to take measures to restrict the opportunities for full participation of the non-natives in order to facilitate native participation. The non-natives so affected have responded well to these arrangements when they understand that it is necessary at times to "favour" the minority in order to arrive at real

equality at a later stage. Such arrangements have been temporary and flexible, according to the objectives and evaluation which native and non-native committees determine.

One recent project undertaken in September and October of this year, a tour through Canada by a group of South American Indians, highlighted the rich resources and cultural values of the native minorities. The month-long visit repeated a similar visit last year to South America by a team of Canadian and American natives. It was organized and directed by committees made up of non-native and native Canadians. The team, which throughout the visit shared their customs, traditions, music and dance, alongside similar presentations by Canada's native peoples, visited 15 native reserves and settlements and 15 predominantly non-native towns and cities. This reflects the kind of social interaction we are striving to initiate to familiarize, inform, and educate members of our own community about the cultural wealth and spiritual heritage of the Indian and Inuit peoples, here in Canada and elsewhere in the Americas.

With respect to the Baha'i community's experience in the area of immigration, we wish to refer again to the recent arrival in Canada of over 1,000 Iranian Baha'is as refugees and other immigrants. This experience represents a remarkable example of harmonious race relations, the sort of success your Committee appears to be seeking, if we understand your Terms of Reference, not simply because of the Government action taken, but because of the experience subsequent to the arrival in Canada of these refugees. The majority of Canadian Baha'is are drawn from the varied ethnic backgrounds of Canada's inhabitants. Notwithstanding the difference in cultural background between these Canadians and the Iranian refugees, the manner of welcoming and assisting in their settlement has been most promising. We draw your attention, in this regard, to an accompanying article describing in some detail the nature of this refugee program taken from the publication Refuge.

Since this article was written, remarkable stories of collaboration and friendship between Iranian refugees and

Canadians from rather typical rural and urban Canadian backgrounds have come to light. In Nova Scotia, for instance, two young Iranians, after 58 hours of travel from India, arrived in Wolfville where they were given hospitality, assisted to locate an apartment, and become familiar with the town. Canadians invited these and other Iranian refugees to a (Baha'i) winter school where they were made to feel welcome. The Canadian Baha'is, for their part, have written our national assembly expressing their joy and pleasure at learning about what had been an unfamiliar culture: "As we reached out to share our small daily living (with our Iranian sisters), we have gained something far greater."

This experience is reflected in over 100 different towns and cities across the country in areas as far apart as the Yukon and Newfoundland. From Red Deer, Alberta to Vernon, B.C., from East St. Paul, Manitoba to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, the stories have been remarkably similar. Opportunities to share different cultural backgrounds, help with the practical issue of finding employment, winter clothing and housing, parties, pot luck suppers, and discussions--all these experiences demonstrate that Canadians, drawn from the mainstream of Canadian life, have the capacity and desire to open their hearts and homes to members of minority groups; in short, to enter into experiences that serve to correct false assumptions, to allay fears about unfamiliar cultures and life styles, and to eliminate prejudice.

Although our experience with hundreds of Iranian refugees and thousands of Canadian natives would be of most interest to your Committee simply because of the numbers involved, we should mention other efforts, based on the need and willingness to respect and uphold the integrity of each particular culture, which have been made to unite many different ethnic and minority backgrounds in one community and to derive benefit from their heritage and ways. Not only do Iranian and native Canadians sit on our local, regional, and national committees and institutions alongside white, anglophone and francophone Canadians, but we have made efforts to promote an even wider diversity on our administrative

institutions. To cite one of the most interesting examples: on the local executive body (the "Spiritual Assembly") of the Winnipeg Baha'i community one will find men and women with the following backgrounds: Iranian Muslim, Egyptian Coptic, Japanese Buddhist, Canadian Mennonite, Jamaican Christian, Guyanese Hindu, Scandinavian Lutheran, Pennsylvania Dutch, and Catholic and Protestant! Other local Baha'i communities demonstrate similar kinds of diversity. Everywhere such diversity is encouraged.

It is our view that the successes we have achieved derive directly from the central teachings of our Faith cited above. These teachings provide the core of educational programs which we carry out in our community. Our children's classes, youth activities, summer and winter residential schools for families, conferences, seminars, and our publication program aim to develop in members of our community an understanding of the principle of the oneness of the human race. In addition, local Baha'i communities in Canada commemorate U.N. Day and Human Rights Day, as a part of our efforts to awaken in ourselves and others the consciousness of the oneness of mankind. All of these activities help to bring together the diverse elements of our community and provide opportunities for experiencing that unity in diversity which is so important if unconscious attitudes and habits of the more parochial past are to be eliminated.

Special Measures Required

While education represents the most important long-term strategy, we do feel there is an important place for affirmative action in the public and private spheres. This is necessary to formally provide equitable opportunities for visible minorities, and to give a "special measure of love" and attention to their specific needs in order to ensure their participation in Canadian life.

It is frequently argued such an approach deprives members of the majority of their just rights. It is our understanding, however, that "a special measure" of public and private action more correctly results in a loss of the

privilege enjoyed by members of the majority. Loss of a privilege feels, of course, exactly like infringement of one's rights.⁶ Thus it may seem that the accidents of birth, social rank, wealth, or cultural identity are rights rather than privileges. In order to change the existing order and transform the relationships among people, certain arrangements, even if short-term, must be taken along with efforts to explain and uphold the inherent fairness of such "special measures of love".

A standard of operation of the Baha'i community and its institutions is the obligation to show preference towards minorities within it. This principle is derived from the spiritual precept that we are to prefer others to ourselves. This represents the key to the achievement of unity in diversity, and the release of the creative capacities of the minority.

"If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favour of the minority, be it racial or otherwise...So great and vital is this principle that in such circumstances, as when an equal number of ballots have been cast in an election, or where the qualifications for any office are balanced between the various races, faiths or nationalities within the [Baha'i] community, priority should unhesitatingly be accorded the party representing the minority, and this for no other reason except to stimulate and encourage it, and afford it an opportunity to further the interests of the community..."⁷

The accompanying documents enlarge on this and other principles of Baha'i belief which may interest your Committee. We draw your attention, in particular, to the Baha'i International Community's submissions to various United Nations agencies in its capacity as a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and UNICEF.

In addition to our recognition of the role of "special measures", or affirmative action, we also wish to record our

support for all efforts to extend through provincial legislatures and other public and private institutions the legal guarantees expressed in the international declaration and covenants, and in the federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Summary

In this submission, we have tried primarily to emphasize the necessity of educational programs. We ask that careful consideration be given to the idea presented earlier of holding a national conference on education focussed on this question of minority participation in Canadian society, at which the principles we have outlined may be given some attention. We would be pleased to provide assistance with the development of the agenda and materials for such a conference, and as one resource draw your attention to the publication, A Violence Free Society, accompanying this submission.

In closing, we want to register our conviction that the kind of public consultation generated by your Special Committee is itself a vital part of the solution to the challenge confronting Canada.

"Say: no man can attain his true station except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation."⁸

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