



Candidates make their pitches at shul forum

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TORONTO — With the 10 Commandments behind them, four political candidates debated each other – sometimes heatedly – Sunday night on the bimah at Shaarei Shomayim Congregation.

From left, CJPAC chair Dennis Bennie; Jason Kenney, secretary of state for multiculturalism and Canadian identity); Joe Volpe, Liberal incumbent for Lawrence-Eglinton; Rosemary Frei, Green candidate in York Centre, and Susan Wallace, NDP candidate for Willowdale.

On the eve of the last day for observant Jewish voters to take advantage of advance polling, Tory Jason Kenney, secretary of state for multiculturalism and Canadian identity; Liberal Joe Volpe, the incumbent in Lawrence-Eglinton; Rosemary Frei, Green party candidate for York Centre, and Susan Wallace, New Democratic Party candidate for Willowdale, gathered to discuss some of the pressing issues for the Jewish community and shed more light on their parties' policies on Israel.

Moderated by local journalist Naomi Parness and organized by the Canadian Jewish Political Action Committee (CJPAC), candidates took written questions from the audience of approximately 150 people and were given one minute to respond directly and then another 45 seconds to rebut their colleagues remarks.

In his opening remarks, Kenney thanked the other candidates for attending, but he tried to downplay the presence of the NDP and Greens, saying there are really only two “main” choices in this election, the Liberals and his Conservatives. It was a sentiment he expressed again later on when he predicted that both the Green party and NDP would “never have to worry” about balancing the country’s budget.

Kenney then recited a list of actions his government has taken to show support for Jews and Israel, including being the first country to pull out of the upcoming followup to the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, – known as Durban II – and for its

consistent support for Israel over the last two years.

Volpe countered that his party's "longstanding" position on Israel meant that the Jewish state has "never had a better friend" in Canada than the Liberals.

For her part, Frei said that while her party supports Israel, it also wants to bring its environmental challenges to light.

"What's the point of defending our homeland if at the same time we're making it unlivable?" she asked, referring to sentiment expressed by Israel's Green party on its website.

Wallace opened by saying the NDP has had a "long and honourable" tradition of working with Canada's ethnic communities and would continue to do so if elected.

Throughout the evening, the candidates tackled questions ranging from their parties' platforms on dealing with a nuclear Iran led by President Mahmoud Amahdinejad to how Canada can prevent tax dollars from reaching terror groups to what their favourite commandment is.

Kenney could barely spit out Amahdinejad's name and title, and he reassured the audience that the Conservatives have been "clear in consistently denouncing" his regime. He later added that the best way to counter Iran's "insane" leadership is to help foster civic society in that country so that "one day, the Persian people will elect a new, sane, government."

Volpe summed up the subject by saying he didn't "think there's a person in this room who wouldn't condemn Ahmadinejad." He then chided the Tories for not "implementing Canada's role under the genocide convention" by refusing to support a motion proposed by Liberal MP Irwin Cotler that urges bringing Ahmadinejad to justice by charging him and Iran with incitement to genocide under international law.

In his rebuttal, Kenney said that when Cotler's motion came before Parliament, the "Israeli government was not in favour" of it because it was concerned it would be used as a "propaganda tool" by Amahdinejad if the motion was defeated at the United Nations.

Frei called Iran's build-up of nuclear capacity "very worrisome," but said there has been a lot of "spin" on the issue and that it's still not clear what stage Iran's nuclear development is at. She cited last year's U.S. National Intelligence Estimate report, which suggested Iran won't achieve nuclear capacity until at least 2013 and warned that any "weapons-based solution" is not part of the Green party's ethos.

Wallace said that the NDP has called for "condemnation of Iran" for its threats to destroy Israel and that her party agrees there must be "absolute vigilance on the proliferation of nuclear weapons."

Referring to Durban II, she added that the NDP has also stated that it would not allow Canada to be part of any peace conference that could be "hijacked in the name of anti-Semitism."

The candidates also spoke about their various parties' positions on the arts, taxation and the economy, echoing what their party leaders have been saying. But the topic of Israel was of paramount concern to the audience.

With regard to the question of Israel's security and Canada's role in ensuring it, Kenney noted that "Israel was roundly condemned in 1981 for taking out the Iraqi nuclear reactor. Today, I think most people are glad they did."

Volpe said a Liberal government would support its "critical ally in the Middle East" by providing logistical support to help it fend off any attack.

Wallace reiterated that the NDP "is a party of peace and dialogue, and our armed forces exist... to protect our national interests," although she said her party has "heightened empathy" for Israel.

In closing, Kenney recapped Prime Minister Stephen Harper's actions in standing up for Israel on the world stage, and he repeated a list of pro-Israel actions the Conservatives have taken, including pulling out of Durban II, joining the International Task Force on the Holocaust and creating the Security Infrastructure Program to help communities threatened by hate crimes.

Volpe ended his evening by reminding the crowd that he has been "unwavering and consistent" in his support for Israel and issues important to the Jewish community. He turned to Kenney and asked why, if the Conservative Party is "such a friend" to the community, it didn't release its platform prior to the Oct. 6 advance poll.

Both Volpe and Kenney received equal applause for their remarks.

Frei summed up by saying that while the Conservatives have a "great record" on Israel, it shouldn't be the only consideration when going to the polls. As for the Liberals, she said the fact that they voted with the Conservatives 44 times over the last year "speaks for itself."

Wallace thanked the audience for listening to her and treating her with respect. "We face a stark choice next week, but I think they're clear. You've got a government that has managed to spend every nickel of surplus left by the previous government... or you have a party that will impose a costed, reasonable plan that will bring us out of deficit, prosperity and a green economy."