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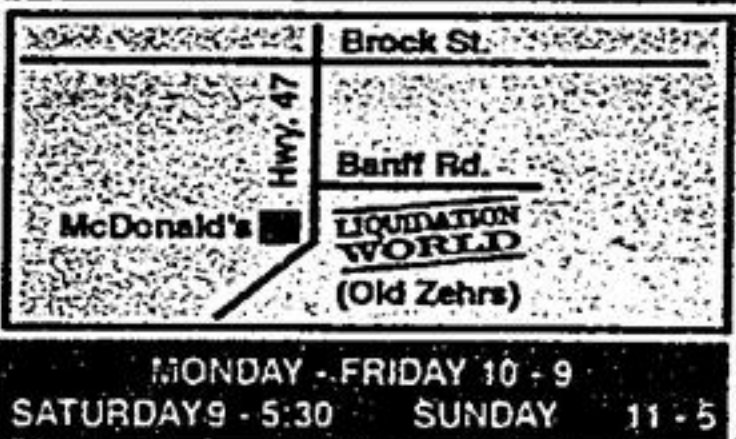
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UN ruling means nothing, board chairperson says

Ontario's school funding called abuse of human rights

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

Canada will join a long list of human rights abusers if it refuses to accept a United Nations decision and force Ontario to fund education to all religious

denominations.
According to Bernie Farber, the Ontario region executive director of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Canada has little choice but to alter its funding methods after a UN human rights committee ruling last week claimed the province is violating an international agreement by funding Catholic schools.

By subsidizing the Catholic system, the province discriminates against religions that don't receive grants, stated the UN ruling.

"Canada is in a very scary situation because they could be placed on a human rights watch list along with the likes of China, Indonesia and other well-known human rights abusers," Farber said.

"This is a discriminatory practice that has to be rectified," Farber said. "And you rectify it by not taking away from the Catholic school system, but by funding all the independent school systems."

Ontario Education Minister Janet Ecker quickly denounced the UN's decision last week, stating the government remains committed to the existing publicly funded education system.

"The Ontario government will continue to uphold its constitutional obligations and fund public and separate schools fully," she said.

However, Thornhill parent Toby Levinson said, if the government funds Catholic education, it would only seem right that every religious denomination should be given equal status.

"This has been an ongoing thing for years, but if Catholic schools get it, everybody else should get it," pointed out Levinson, whose son Michael and daughter Elise both attend the Associated Hebrew Day School.

Provisions of the Constitution Act of 1867 require Ontario to fully fund the Catholic school system. And, in 1996, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld Ontario's dual education system, ruling the Constitution Act took precedence over the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Toronto parent Arieh Waldman then took his grievance to the UN, arguing the province should reimburse him the \$100,000 he has spent to have his two children educated at Toronto's Bialik Hebrew Day School. He now expects full compensation from the province before Feb. 3, 2000.

Although the decision is not legally binding, the UN committee gave Canada 90 days to respond.

But public school chairperson Bill Grothers said the UN's decision means "absolutely nothing," since confederation allotted Catholics the right to a funded education system. "It's a condition created when this country was created," Grothers said. "I suspect in time you will see a merger based upon religion, but it will only happen when the Catholic system wants to be merged."

The United Nations has no authority. It's as much a political decision as it is anything else. One could argue to follow this way of thinking in Ontario, we should be organizing Chinese-funded schools because there are as many people in central greater Toronto whose mother tongue is Chinese (as) opposed to French.

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