

Joerg Haider's Canadian friends

Keith Jones
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What the Austrian ultra-rightist Joerg Haider did during his visit to Canada last week and whom he saw remains clouded in mystery. One thing is certain, however. Haider's ostensibly "private visit" was motivated by a very definite political agenda. The head of Austria's Freedom Party now wants to refashion his public image, so as to take the sting out of the charge he is a Nazi apologist and a racist.

By recasting himself as a run-of-the-mill right-wing politician committed to social spending cuts, tighter immigration controls, and law and order, Haider hopes to defuse opposition at home and among Austria's Western allies to the coalition government that his Freedom Party has forged with the Conservative People's Party.

Haider spent most of his Canadian visit trying to woo Canadian Jewish leaders. In this endeavor he was joined by an Israeli businessman and by Peter Sichrovsky, a Freedom Party Member of the European Parliament who is Jewish. For the most part, Haider was curtly rebuffed. His request for a special guided tour of the Montreal Holocaust Museum was refused, recognized as a transparent attempt to stage a photo opportunity. The request, said Dorothy Zalkman Howard, head of the Quebec region of the Canadian Jewish Congress, was "pure exploitation." "It's an attempt to reinvent and re-create himself," she said.

Sichrovsky took great exception to the Museum's action. "A ridiculous little museum that pretends to preserve the remembrance of the Holocaust closed the door because of a political reason. We never got such a hysterical hate attack before." Sichrovsky's "ridiculous little museum" has been financially supported by and is helping collect the testimony of Montreal's large community of Nazi concentration camp survivors. (Estimates vary, but according to one expert Montreal has the second or third largest population of Jewish concentration camp survivors in the world.)

Asked by reporters why he had chosen Canada for his first foreign visit since the Freedom's Party's controversial entry into government, Haider said he had been invited to a Tash Hasidic wedding in a Montreal suburb. But a spokesman for the Jewish sect denied having issued Haider an invitation, and in the end the Freedom Party leader did not attend the wedding.

The real reason for Haider's choice of Canada likely had something to do with his having a number of influential Canadian friends and apologists.

Frank Stronach, the Austrian-born industrialist who owns Canada's largest auto parts company, Magna International, has close ties to all Austria's major political parties, including the Freedom Party. According to Haider, Stronach is "interested in all parties because he is a global player." The Freedom Party nominee for the post of Finance Minister in the coalition government, Karl-Heinz Grasser, was until earlier this month the chief spokesman for Magna International in Austria.

Canadian newspaper baron Conrad Black has been campaigning in support of Haider. On successive days last week his chief British mouthpiece, the *Daily Telegraph*, ran commentaries arguing that Haider should not be ostracized by international public opinion. The first written by Black's wife, Barbara Amiel, said Haider was the victim of a campaign of "political hysteria" mounted by the Socialist International. The second, entitled "Let's not be beastly to the Austrians," was penned by Lord George Wiedenfeld, a Viennese Jew who found refuge in Britain in 1938 and now sits on the board of directors of one of Black's companies.

A Vice-President of Southam, one of Black's Canadian newspaper chains, has denied the company had any hand in organizing Haider's visit. The Freedom Party leader granted the chain's Montreal daily, the *Montreal Gazette*, an exclusive interview—the only

interview he gave while in Canada.

The *Gazette* termed Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy's directive to his officials to monitor Haider's statements so as to make sure he kept his "repugnant views" to himself while in Canada "chilling."

Meanwhile Black's most important Canadian daily, the *National Post*, charged Axworthy with hypocrisy, noting that last year the Canadian government had hosted several dictators, who have been accused of gross human rights violations, at the summit of *La Francophonie*. This line was also adopted by the Reform Party, which has a history of fanning anti-immigrant and anti-Quebec chauvinism. Reform's Keith Martin accused Axworthy of "displaying enormous hypocrisy" in castigating Haider.

Unquestionably, there is a great deal of hypocrisy in the attitude of Western governments to the new Austrian government, and not just because Western governments routinely support dictatorships and ignore human right violations for commercial and geopolitical reasons. In many respects Haider's reactionary socioeconomic program is similar to that being pursued by Canada's Liberal government and other Western governments.

But the charges of hypocrisy from Black's newspapers and Reform have a sinister ulterior motive. Their agenda is to legitimize ultra-right-wing politics, including the politics of race and nationalism. Lest we forget, the campaign in defence of the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet has been spearheaded by none other than Black's *Daily Telegraph*.

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