

# BMO CEO and wife launch FAST in Quebec

By Mike Cohen  
Tribune Correspondent

MONTREAL — A mere seven months from now, BMO Financial Group President and CEO Tony Comper will turn 62 years old. According to company policy, it will also signal his retirement. While he may walk away from those duties, he says has

every intention of continuing his vigorous fight against anti-semitism.

Comper, a 2003 B'nai Brith Canada Award of Merit Dinner Honouree, was in Montreal last week to launch a Quebec version of the BMO-sponsored initiative Fighting Antisemitism Together (FAST). He, along with his wife Elizabeth, founded this



BMO Financial Group President and CEO Tony Comper, a previous honouree of B'nai Brith Canada's Award of Merit Dinner, and his wife Elizabeth start FAST in Quebec.

offensive in 2005 in response to B'nai Brith Canada's Annual Audit of Antisemitic Incidents, which reported an all-time record of 857 reported incidents of antisemitism in Canada in 2004. FAST has evolved into a coalition of non-Jewish Canadian business and community leaders who have come together to speak out against antisemitism and to fund education and other projects that encourage other non-Jews to speak out.

"We plan to establish a FAST Foundation and my wife and I intend to be involved," Comper told a press conference last week after a very well received address to the Canadian Club at the Fairmont Queen Elizabeth Hotel.

The morning of the speech, attended by top leaders of the Jewish community and business leaders, FAST published full page ads in the French language daily *La Presse* and the English Montreal daily *Gazette* under the headline 'Why We Must Speak Out: Non-Jewish Canadian Leaders Stand Up Against Antisemitism in Canada.'

"We created FAST in honour of the right of Jewish children to live secure and unafraid, and with a solemn promise that Jews are no longer on their own in this great nation in this new century," Comper said. "Following the launch of FAST in Quebec in January, we will introduce a made-in-Quebec version of Choose Your Voice: Antisemitism in Canada, a curriculum-based program that is already reaching young hearts and minds in many Canadian schools. We hope to embolden and encourage those with still-open hearts and minds to stand up and speak out against discrimination, wherever and however it rears its ugly

head, and marginalize the anti-semites and bullies and bigots and take away their power to intimidate."

Even before this summer's escalation of the conflict in the Middle East created the inevitable spike in antisemitic activity, Comper said he had become personally very concerned about the growing tendency, here in Canada and indeed worldwide, to single out Israel for criticisms and international sanctions out of all proportion to any other party in the Middle East.

"I am thinking, for example, of the condemnation of the state of Israel a few months ago by the Ontario leadership of the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Toronto Conference of the United Church of Canada," he said. "I ascribe no motives to the people who made these decisions beyond the ones they ascribed to themselves — a legitimate disagreement with Israeli policy regarding Palestine. While I profoundly disagree with this one-sided take on who's to blame for what in the Middle East, and find its solutions untenable, I accept that these views can be honestly held, and can also be — let me stress this — utterly free of antisemitic intent. What I worry about, though, is not the intent but the effect of criticizing Israel so vehemently and disproportionately, and as tends to be the case, to the exclusion of all others. I worry that those with darker motives will treat these honestly held views as justification for hating Jews and wishing them scourged from the earth."

Comper said that while well-educated and presumably well-intentioned critics may be able to clearly distinguish 'Israeli policy' from 'the Jews,' the fineness of the distinction is lost, often willfully so, on people in search of a pretext and trolling around for permission to further enflame antisemitism.

"So as much as I may defend these critics' right to criticize, as a founder of FAST and a student of history, I truly wish that they would consider all the possible implications before making these public statements," he noted. "It can also be argued that whether we're talking historically or right here in the moment, bred-in-the-bone anti-semites don't need encouragement. If there is one thing I have had driven home to me in the 16 months since my wife Elizabeth and I founded FAST, it is that people who want to hate Jews can always find reasons for hating Jews."

In the spring of 2004, Comper pointed out there was a major spike in antisemitic incidents in this country and elsewhere, helping to make that year the worst-ever year in recorded history for antisemitic activity in Canada.

"Although the library firebombing here in Montreal was the most grievous of these incidents, it was the weekend-long rampage of

tombstone-toppling and swastika-painting in and around our hometown, Toronto, which put FAST into motion," he explained.

"Early the following Monday morning, as I was shaving to prepare to go to work, Elizabeth stood in the bathroom doorway and told me how we — she and I personally — had to do something about antisemitism. She talked about what she'd watched in horror and sadness and growing anger on the news the night before — coming back over and over again to the uncertain and frightened faces of the Jewish children who'd been interviewed that Sunday evening. That was Elizabeth's tipping point, as she would later describe it; mine came the following morning, almost precisely in mid-shave."

FAST's first educational project in Ontario is called Choose Your Voice. Aimed at the hearts and minds of students in grades 6 to 9, kits have been distributed to schools in more than 30 school board districts. And the DVD component of the program, which takes aim at antisemitism and all the other ugly 'isms' that pollute our world, has won two international awards.

"We are now developing French-language and English-language versions of Choose Your Voice that are tailored to the unique educational requirements and needs of the people of Quebec," Comper said, adding that discussions are underway with Quebec's Ministry of Education.