

LETTER TO TORONTO MAYOR: APRIL 22, 2010

SFSC objects to threats against Pride Toronto funding because of Queers Against Israeli Apartheid

April 22, 2010

Mr. David Miller, Mayor City of Toronto

Dear Mr. Mayor:

We are writing to express the strong objections of the Seriously Free Speech Committee to comments made by Mike Williams, GM, Economic Development and Culture and Ceta Ramkhalawansingh, City Manager of Diversity Management and Community Engagement regarding funding for Toronto Pride as quoted in the April 19, 2009 Toronto Star.

Their comments are directed at controlling the political free expression of organizations in the Toronto Gay Pride parade, particularly the organization Queers Against Israel Apartheid (QuAIA). QuAIA is an organizational name that encapsulates both its members political analysis and their groups position on the social organization of Israeli society.

Mr. Williams is cited as saying that the participation of QuAIA in the Gay Pride parade violated the City of Toronto's anti-discrimination policy. The policy, however, "prohibits discrimination and harassment and protects the right to be free of

hate activity” based on a number of categories including “ethnic origin,....political affiliation [and], race”. Having an organizational name or slogan and literature which states a political position does not constitute discrimination.

Using the term apartheid is not related to ethnic identity, race or political affiliation but to the political actions of the State of Israel and its governing ideology, Zionism. Opposition to the policy of a state is not hate speech. To deny QuAIA’s participation in the Toronto Pride parade on the basis of its political expression would be against Sec. 2 (b) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Ms. Ramkhalawansingh stated that racism creates a “poisoned environment” .. “where not everyone feels welcome”. Again, criticism against state policy does not constitute racial harassment based on race, colour or ancestry as defined by the Ontario Human Rights Code. It is political comment and opposition to a political ideology – in this instance, Zionism, and its practices in Israel. Zionism as a political ideology is supported by many Jews, but not all Jews and perhaps not even the majority. It is supported by some Christians but not all Christians.

Your staff are incorrect in asserting that describing Israel as apartheid is a form of racial harassment. Political criticism might make people feel uncomfortable but freedom of speech trumps feelings of comfort. Basing funding decisions or laws on someone’s subjective feeling will lead to a point where there is no freedom for public debate. The apartheid criticism of Israel is not directed against individuals but against the State of Israel. Some organizations or individuals might not appreciate criticism against

a government they support or its governing ideology. They might even try to have such speech suppressed through financial pressure or outlawed but such criticism is not racist harassment.

The City of Toronto is embarking on a very dangerous approach to working with community groups by seeking to suppress political free speech as a condition of funding. It must publicly reverse the threats against Pride Toronto.

The Seriously Free Speech Committee was formed in February, 2008 to defend individuals who were being sued by Canwest for producing a parody of The Vancouver Sun and its one-sided coverage of the Israel occupation of Palestine.

Sincerely

Brian Campbell

Co-chair, Seriously Free Speech Committee

cc: Toronto City Councilors