

Submitted by Corveller Carroll

ED14.4.3

Torontoist

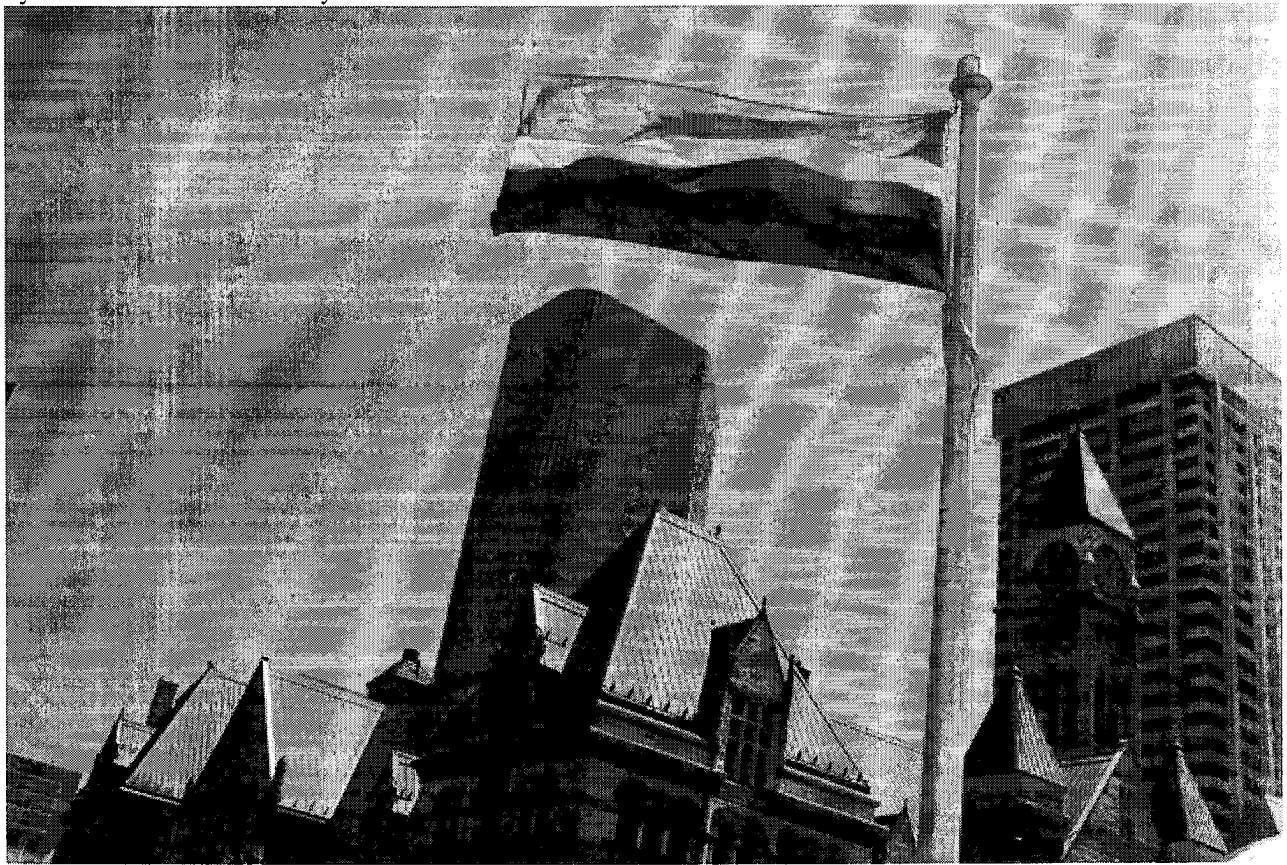
June 6, 2012 at 9:45 am

politics

Pride, Queers Against Israeli Apartheid, and Our Sense of Inclusion

Pride Toronto deserves its funding, whether or not QuAIA marches in the parade.

By Hamutal Dotan • Photo by Corbin Smith



The rainbow flag at Toronto City Hall.

This morning Toronto city councillors will, as part of their monthly agenda, consider a standard funding motion. It comes before them every year and has the technocratic name of Major Cultural Institutions Allocation; it calls for the disbursement of grants to some key organizations in Toronto: the Toronto International Film Festival, Luminato, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and so on. Also on the list: Pride Toronto, which is slated to receive \$123,807.

Councillor James Pasternak (Ward 10, York Centre) is expected to raise objections to that allocation today—specifically, to call on council to defer a decision about whether to grant that money until after the Pride parade is held on July 1. The reason is that he objects to the presence of a group called Queers Against Israeli

Apartheid at Pride; Pasternak contends that Pride Toronto should not receive its annual budget allocation if QuAIA marches in the parade. He is not the only one with concerns, and this is not the first year Pride funding has been put at risk—last year the controversy grew so fierce that QuAIA withdrew from the event. It is a collision of identity politics, constituent relations, and community protectionism in which most of the participants have lost all sense of proportion.

Let us attempt to restore it.

That Pride Toronto's funding will be debated in this way, for this reason, is preposterous. That Pride Toronto's funding is conditional in this way, for this reason, is preposterous. Pride is one of Toronto's great cultural organizations. Barring financial incompetence, a drastic change in its mission, or a drastic change in the City of Toronto's approach to funding cultural organizations, its grant shouldn't be up for negotiation at all.

Toronto is a city which likes to congratulate itself for being the most welcoming, the most open, the most inclusive in the world. Formed by generation after generation of immigrants, populated by residents speaking the greatest variety of languages, an international champion for diversity and human rights.

It's a nice story, and sometimes it really is true. But not always—and certainly not if we tell Pride that its legitimacy as a City-supported celebration is conditional; that it is nice to have around, but it's not essential.

Pride Toronto did not spring up last week or last year, and the Pride parade is not some novelty we've yet to incorporate into the fabric of the city. This is a cultural entity with a long history, and whose contributions to the city aren't—shouldn't be, at least—in question. Pride Toronto has been instrumental in pushing Toronto to be better at what it says it is—welcoming and open and inclusive. Pride is a celebration of and for one particular community, but it contributes to the health and vitality of Toronto as a whole. It makes us a better city.

Queers Against Israeli Apartheid, by contrast, is a small group of political protesters which does not violate any anti-discrimination policy and gives no indication of being motivated by hate. It is prone to ill-informed sloganeering, but this is an offence against reason, not human rights, and certainly not an offence so grave that a third party should be punished if QuAIA shows up at their party.

“Apartheid” is a word in Afrikaans. It means “separateness” and it describes a policy of racial segregation that was enforced in South Africa for the latter half of the 20th century. Which is to say, it is a proper name: it describes a particular circumstance and place and time. Exporting it to other circumstances, in this case to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is an intellectual shortcut that yields no benefits. It does not shed light on what's happening in the Middle East and it obscures what did happen in South Africa: it mutes the particularities of one nation's experience and turns it into some sort of stand-in for nationally imposed ethnic segregation at large.

Let us agree that what happened in South Africa, and what continues to happen in Israel/Palestine, is tragic. Surely these tragedies each warrant their own language, merit their own names and vocabulary. (There is already a term, widely used by Palestinians to describe their situation: Nakba is the word, and it means “disaster.”)

The problem with the term “Israeli Apartheid” isn't that it is discriminatory, or that it is hateful. It's that it's ahistorical. Last year City staff, on instructions from council, reviewed the issue and concluded that “the phrase ‘Israeli Apartheid’ in and of itself does not violate the City's Anti-discrimination policy ... [and] has not been found to violate either the Criminal Code or the Human Rights Code (Ontario)” [PDF]. Unsatisfied with that, council asked City staff to revise the anti-discrimination policy. The draft of those revisions came out this week, and as far as anyone can tell, “Israeli Apartheid” still won't be in violation. The only way we're going to get “Israeli Apartheid” listed as discriminatory, it seems, is if council decides to do it directly, an ad hoc addition to the books that isn't backed up by the literature on the subject or an assessment of how we actually use these words.

And that is precisely the problem. If council votes to defer Pride's funding, to make it contingent on the appearance, or not, of QuAIA, the message it sends to Pride—and by extension to Toronto's LGBTQ community—is that its role in the city, its place in the city, its participation in the life of the city, is likewise contingent, not on compliance with a set of well-founded principles but on an ad hoc exception created because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a mess and we're not particularly good at talking about it. It privileges one group's sense of belonging and acceptance over another's.

Toronto is a city that prides itself precisely on shunning that sort of divisiveness. We hope city councillors remember that today.

UPDATE 12:12 PM: In response to past controversies with QuAIA, Pride Toronto has set up a formal dispute resolution process to consider complaints from the public about groups that have registered to participate in the Pride parade. We asked the chair of the dispute resolution panel, Douglas Elliot, whether anyone had lodged a complaint with Pride regarding QuAIA's intended participation in the parade this year. As of this morning, nobody has.