

Jane Farrow's City Hall Deputation for Executive Committee June 13, 2010

I appear before you today as an ex-honoured dyke. My connection to the issue at hand is as a community leader who was to be given that title this year at Pride. Originally it was my pleasure to join the ranks of many lesbians I have admired over the years. Leaders who stuck their neck out, paraded in the street, demanded equality and generally blazed the trail I practically took for granted for the last couple decades. These people were my role models. I was lucky to be considered worthy of their company.

But then in May some unfortunate and misguided decisions were made by Pride Toronto, under some pressure from the city. 'Queers Against Israeli Apartheid' was banned as a group, and as a message. And so I declined the honour, and joined a rapidly growing group of community members and observers who are very concerned about free speech at Pride and in this city.

And now we're all in a very bad situation. A critical trust has been broken. The queer community has been plunged into a crisis that is breaking them apart. On the one side there are people who believe that their Pride Week had to do what it did because it is threatened financially and faces imminent collapse. On the other, there are those of us who feel that we are fighting to assert the core principles of freedom of speech and assembly upon which the queer community fought and gained its historic liberation.

What actually hangs in the balance though is much more than Pride Week. It's about our city. Toronto is a city of tolerance, complexity and diversity. All eyes are on this city, for more than the G20, and the city can play a key role in reasserting these core values.

The words "Israeli apartheid" were the lightning rod for this crisis, the allegation that it had no place in a Gay Pride Parade, it was 'too political'. But being queer is political – and when more than a few of us get together, political terrain is created – whatever your opinions on Palestine or Israel may be. I am proud of the long tradition of political speech at the Pride parade. Queers have marched for a wide range of issues, they're anti-meat, anti-fur, anti-NAFTA, pro-public nudity, and anti-homeless – issues that might on the outside seem like they have nothing to do with being queer. But one of the great gifts of being queer is a passionate perspective on anyone's struggle to be heard, to be seen, to be equal.

The writer Paul Gallant wrote somewhere this week, if you haven't been offended by something in the Pride Parade in the last 30 years, you haven't been watching. But being made 'uncomfortable' by some words, or a group of people in a parade with whom you politically disagree, isn't a good enough reason to trample people's right to participate.

For me this isn't about left or right, corporate or non-corporate, or who's right or wrong in the Middle East, it's simply about free speech. I stand for our right to be offended at times by that speech. It's good for the neighbourhood, it's good for Toronto, it's good for democracy.

And so I also stand before you today not just as a formerly 'honoured dyke', but as someone who is particularly committed to this city as a place where people come together, peacefully and compassionately from Steeles to Lakeshore, Queen East to Queen West. Torontonians have a demonstrated ability to bridge gaps through conversation, share space, exploring differences and come out stronger and wiser. Underpinning all this is a healthy, secure and vigorous commitment to free speech and freedom of assembly.

Back to the issue at hand – the growing divide in the queer community and our city goes back to how this whole thing was handled by Pride Toronto and the City. The city stated that Pride Toronto was at risk of violating the anti-discrimination policy and need to take measures to avoid this. Pride Toronto panicked, and to stamp out the perceived threat, decided to put limits on free speech as a way to 'conform' to the anti-discrimination policy. Add to this the fact that things can get a little bit weirder than usual in an election year, and here we are, dealing with the volatile political, community and financial fallout.

Good leaders are capable of making hard decisions and holding the line, but better leaders consider new information and are open to changing the course. Digging in and getting entrenched is only making things worse. If Pride and the city stick to this course, the next decisions before you will be to decide if you will actually arrest people for saying the words "Israeli Apartheid" at Pride, and if so, how many thousands of people you can accommodate in your jails.

BTW, has anyone mentioned that Jimmy Carter wrote a book called Palestine: Peace or Apartheid in 2006... and nobody got arrested when they said the book title?

City Councillors, Mayor Miller, we need your help to reassert this city's reputation as one that celebrates diversity and encourages neighbourliness....it does not punish political speech. We need your help

in strongly encouraging Pride Toronto to sit down with the community it claims to represent to work out a way of moving forward without limiting political speech, and in a way that brings together the community instead of tearing it apart. The strategy for naming new international marshals is very promising – but Pride Toronto needs a nudge, from you.

It seems to me therefore, that the wisest thing the city could do is

- publically state that the anti-discrimination policy cannot be interpreted as a limit on the constitutional right to free speech,
- publically state that Pride Toronto's funding and permits are secure – request that Pride Toronto rescind it's ban of the phrase "Israeli Apartheid" and welcome Queers Against Israeli Apartheid to the parade,
- and strongly encourage Pride Toronto to sit down with it's community and enter into meaningful dialogue with the community that it has divided with its handling of this situation

Jane Farrow, Ex-Honoured Dyke 2010