

By MICHAEL WENT

My intended Executive Committee Deputation

Who am I

My name is Michael Went. My LGBT activism includes an AIDS organization board, an LGBT network at my workplace, an LGBT business conference, a former board member of The 519 Church St. Community Centre, and a marcher with Pride Toronto's International Human Rights contingent. Having said that, I am here only representing myself.

My understanding of Pride & Toronto

Pride is an economic development opportunity – 600 jobs, \$136m economic impact, and thousands of tourists. This should be reason enough for me to call on the City to deny the motion regarding funding. But there's more. I understand Pride as a party, and have danced the night away every Pride since 1997. Pride's where I met my husband. I understand Pride as a commemoration of past gay rights struggles. I understand Pride as an expression of self, in all ones diversity, including political opinion. Pride is protest and celebration expressing the values of freedom, diversity, inclusion and pluralism.

Toronto is a place where people of different views can live together. Growing up in Scarborough and Markham, there was a multicultural fair where the Greeks and Macedonians didn't like each other, but found ways to co-exist, and I managed to learn about both. I am a queer who likes dialogue, who wants to learn about global issues from diverse perspectives. And now I'm told that I'm not allowed to hear one (but only during the parade).

Canada is a place where while some words may offend some, no one has the right to silence the voices they find disagreeable. While we celebrate our freedom of speech as a people who have been denigrated and denied basic rights we are gripped with the responsibility to listen, include and respect those with whom we disagree. Our values of respect, inclusion and pluralism require us to reach out and celebrate contrary and complex perspectives which comes with being the world's most diverse queer community. As people who have experienced hatred we know we must stand up to it and yet we also know to never treat criticism as if it was hatred.

Impacts on me of current impasse

I'm feeling confusion about the City's decision. Groups similar to Queers Against Israeli Apartheid recently participated in Tel Aviv Pride, and Edmonton Pride. Wikipedia offers the full range of debate about the term. I've heard from Jewish friends who find the term Israeli apartheid offensive and don't think this is a queer issue; and from Jewish friends that have never been offended by the use of the term to describe Israeli policies. How did the City decide who was "right"? If the term is so hateful, why does the ban only apply to the parade? You didn't act to censor Theatre Passe Muraille, so why is it OK to censor Pride?

I'm feeling suspicious in ways I really don't like to be, that City anti-discrimination policy is determined by lobbying, not by evidence.

I'm feeling despair that no decision will be well received, and no compromise accepted by any of the groups involved.

I'm feeling anger that we have such a split in the LGBT community.

Impacts on Pride staff and volunteers

And I know that I'm not feeling the worst. Among Pride staff and volunteers I include my husband, friends, and work colleagues. Pride has spent hundreds – if not thousands – of hours on this issue, to the detriment of not spending enough time working with every other group in the community. We in the community have been really cruel to each other – calling each other anti-Semites, liars, corrupt, and worse. This conflict has "rained on our parade".

Pride Coalition for Free Speech

Out of this sense of despair I was inspired to reach out and engage in dialogue. I have, with trepidation, reached out to friends involved in local Jewish organizations. I helped to organize a community meeting called "Our Pride Includes Free Speech", that welcomed over 600 attendees last week.

We've heard statements to rescind the ban from the Canadian Civil Liberties Union, Buddies In Bad Times Theatre, The 519 Church St. Community Centre, Ryerson Student's Union, York Federation of Students, the Unity Conference for Gay-Straight Alliances, historians, journalists, lawyers, artists and performers. These are people who have worked on LGBT issues in our community for years. Are we all wrong?

The LGBT community has responded in various ways, including working within Pride, protesting Pride, or breaking up the Pride Toronto as we know it to establish competing events.

Solutions

I wonder if those advocating for the ban feel any better about their efforts. Is this really what they wanted? Are they happier coming to this parade? Do they feel safer? I haven't heard Yes. There's got to be a better way forward.

One idea is to explore having two international grand marshals – one Israeli and one Palestinian – as a symbol to the broader community and the broader world that in Toronto different communities can coexist. The hypothesis is that an International Grand Marshal from Israel would do more to make some local Jewish people feel safer in the parade, compared to the current situation.

I ask you to support symbolic opportunities of hope through willingness to explore with Pride Toronto the concept of joint international grand marshals.

In the actual Middle East crisis, much of the world calls for some type of peace process. I'm calling on the City of Toronto to lead a peace process of Pride Toronto's Middle East crisis.

MICHAEL WENT – EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE DEPUTATION, JUNE 13, 2010