

By Roy Mitchell

My name is Roy Mitchell. I am a member of the Pride Coalition for Free Speech. I am the administrator of Trinity Square Video, an artist-run centre dedicated to the creation and exhibition of video art.

I think it best that I explain how I came to the coalition and then how I the spectre of censorship scares the hell out of me and then I think I may scare the hell out of some of you and ask you to take a stand. My deputation will be short, sweet and maybe meander a bit. Hold on to your seats, this may be a bumpy ride.

I came to the Pride Coalition before it began. I received a call from Jane Walsh, a member of Pride's Human Rights Committee and she needed me to find people like myself who were involved in the arts and could speak to the co-chairs of the pride board at the time about censorship and how it would reduce the credibility of a festival that celebrated the achievements of the queer community and recognized the struggles still ahead for us. Jane said that the Board was very concerned about how artists would react to any censorship because they knew that artists have a strong aversion to censorship and organize very well to oppose it.

Celebrating the achievements of the past is easy, but mobilizing a community to fight for the rights of queers internationally now isn't that easy. I will not speak to the Israeli Apartheid words and the ban. I can only say I support the organization Queers against Israeli

Apartheid in their message and the work that they want to do to support progressive change in Israel and Palestine. That said, do you know that there are groups that I don't support? Yes, there aren't many, but for me to list them to you now would be a waste of all of our time. There are groups that I support and there are groups I don't support, but I would never ban any group from the pride parade.

So celebrating the achievements – easy. Pride did recognize leadership in the community. Why do you think that over 21 former honorees returned their awards because of Pride's ban on the words "Israeli Apartheid"? Many support Queers Against Israeli Apartheid, while some don't. Yet all of them support free speech.

On the other hand, working politically in solidarity with queers in other parts of the worlds – not so easy. And that's what brought me to that meeting with the two co-chairs. In the late winter of 2010, Pride Toronto initiated a policy where any organization marching in the Parade to submit their signs 2 weeks before the parade where an Ethics Committee would decide what was appropriate for the Pride Parade. Appropriate?

Sunday night I watched as Lea Delaria and Kiki from Kiki and Herb said fuck, shit and talked about penises to a packed square. No one screamed how offense the language was and no one complained that the pole dancer was a little too provocative. There was a male pole dancer but obviously the cameraman was a straight man and I didn't realize there was a male pole dancer until the show as almost over.

I'd complain about that. No one was complaining and everyone was having a good time. Everyone from everywhere. Toronto is a peaceful place and queers are the most peaceful people you'd want to meet. No signs will incite violence. Some signs might incite some pretty snappy retorts...but that ability to make lemons from lemonade is something queers everywhere celebrate.

We convinced the Board that the policy would not work and they listened to the community and rescinded the policy.

I am a video maker and know some of Canada's most recognized artists are involved in this debate. Some of them even belong to QuAIA. These are people that dare us to think and offer us ways to look at the world that might challenge what we think or lead us to new ways to think. Great art can lead to great debate. We do not all think the same, we are not afraid of debate and we have a history of breaking down the walls that keep us from thinking and doing. It is not surprising that my fellow artists are interested in breaking down the walls that separate people in Israel. Richard Florida, and we know the city loves him, said that queers bring a vibrancy to any city. A vibrancy of culture. Don't shut this discussion down. Don't make Toronto look like a place we know it's not. It is a vibrant city and a city where people are amazed at how well we live together. This dynamism is not because we are stopped from talking about issues; it's because we talk about issues.

Now why did this ban take place? I hear the city say it's Pride itself and lobbyists bringing on the ban and the city councilors are just listening to people and organizations. You see how many organizations are lined up in support of the ban today. You see how many are lined up against the ban. And now we have questions of what should happen if people carry signs that say Israeli Apartheid or what would happen if Queers Against Israeli Apartheid marched. Do you actually want these people arrested? Removed from the Parade? We want to know where you stand and where the leadership is at City Hall supporting Free Speech. I want to know where you stand on what is right and what is wrong. It is a very simple question and there aren't a lot of people here on the Executive Committee. I want to know (even though the motion was removed, where you sit on this issue). Free speech is important and each one of you has a position of leadership

History always has a way of teaching us. One of the most poignant books I read as a child and continue to read from time to time is Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. A book that was censored because it was considered "dangerous" because of profanity and undermining of race relations. Bans never work. People will continue to talk about Israel and Palestine; many will talk about Israeli Apartheid. The debate will go on and I wish I could say that Queers will be the ones to solve the problems in the Middle East. That would be amazing. But Queers will be the ones who will fight for Freedom of Speech to enable the discussion to continue. There is nothing

dangerous about dialogue. There is something very dangerous from banning words. So now I want to hear from each and everyone of you, simple yes or now will do. Do you support the motion, do you support the ban and are you actually saying that people who chose to exercise their right to free speech could be removed from the Parade by the police. That image alone should be chilling enough for you make a decision, and a decision that may be very difficult for you, to support free speech.

Thank you for your time.

My name is Roy Mitchell and I am against banning any words, I am for free speech.