

By Shawn Syms

I did not get a chance to deliver my deputation to the City's Executive Committee today. Here's what I had planned to say:

Executive Committee members:

Toronto's LGBT communities are in trouble and we need your help. A non-violent human-rights organization has been effectively blockaded from its rightful place in our annual Pride Parade. Queers Against Israeli Apartheid, or QuAIA, consists of veteran queer-community members expressing a legitimate political perspective. They use language endorsed by everyone from South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu to US ex-president Jimmy Carter.

Councillor Mammoliti has described QuAIA using the words "hate-filled" and "discriminatory" with no supporting evidence. City staff have intervened as well, through letters and comments to the media that have exerted undue pressure on Pride Toronto, who have been left to deal with the aftershock.

Community members on all sides have been subjected to the aggressive campaign of Martin Gladstone, who's had surprising success in controlling the terms of the debate. He's popularized two specific fallacies—first, that QuAIA is some kind of alien force "hijacking" Pride to promote its own irrelevant agenda, and, second, that Pride Toronto is no place for politics outside of a narrowly defined "gay" scope. Spouting this till he's blue in the face doesn't make it true—just as his claims QuAIA is "anti-Israel" or "spread[ing] hate" are equally absurd.

I've attended 21 Prides in Toronto. Each featured political participation from a spectrum of nominally "non-gay" causes, from the animal-liberation movement to the Conservative Party of Canada. QuAIA sits comfortably within that tradition. Members of QuAIA are well-known, longtime leaders in Toronto's LGBT communities who've created vital institutions, from expressing our culture through film festivals to saving our lives through AIDS activism. QuAIA members help build a community that *resists* violence and hate, through direct involvement in anti-racist education and founding organizations for queer and trans people of colour. For Martin Gladstone—or Councillor Mammoliti—to suggest the opposite is an unconscionable sham. For the City of Toronto to be so deceived would be a tragedy.

This is an issue of free speech—but it symbolizes more than that. Talk to a QuAIA member or read the clear-headed perspective on their website—and you may just come to the conclusion that the organization's views are in fact perfectly aligned with the past and present aims of the LGBT freedom movement.

It all comes down *self-determination*. As queer people, we want to control our own bodies. To move freely on our streets without fear of violence or social control. To define our own relationships. To be free of employment barriers. To communicate without censorship. To access services and support adding quality to our lives.

Everything I've just mentioned—lack of personal autonomy, restricted movement, risk of assault, incomplete legal personhood, inability to live or work where you choose: in short, second-class citizenship—is also an issue for Palestinians in their checkpoint-controlled existence in the context of the illegal Israeli occupation.

You may or may not agree with me on this, but I'd like to be able to engage you—and my community—in discussion about it, without any specific words being forbidden for reasons that don't stand up to fair and dispassionate scrutiny.

Canadian queer and trans communities in Canada may have made progress, but faraway struggles still resonate for us. For gay men of my generation for example, hearing about the blockade of humanitarian aid to Gaza—including medications—it's hard not to reflect on instances in the AIDS pandemic when people have been denied treatment because of governmental indifference to suffering and death.

Queers understand complex, life-and-death issues. And we like to talk about them.

We don't celebrate Pride by putting our heads in the sand—we acknowledge difficult issues as part of the fabric of our vibrant lives. Taking away the words we use to have those conversations doesn't make anyone safer. In fact, it has the opposite effect.

Our community is in chaos today. Pride Toronto has experienced a widespread and growing loss of confidence. The Pride Guide is full of inaccuracies because so many community representatives have pulled out—because of the ban, not because of QuAIA. I suspect there are even more visible protests to come this week—but all of this can be halted if we get your support today.

Pride Toronto executive director Tracey Sandilands says her staff and board do not want to censor and many of them personally support QuAIA, but their hands were forced by Councillor Mammoliti's motion. To have the motion declared redundant or withdrawn from the agenda won't undo the damage.

I urge you instead to formally ask Pride Toronto to rescind its ban of the phrase "Israeli Apartheid" and to officially confirm the accepted participation of QuAIA.

I hope we can count on you. Thank you for your consideration.

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