



Quotas Okay For Whites Like Bush

By Dr. Lorne Foster

Toronto mayoral frontrunner and long-time NDPer David Miller, recently took part in an all-candidates debate sponsored by the Policy Roundtable Mobilizing Professions and Trades (PROMPT), where he professed his commitment to redressing racial inequality by promoting a workforce that represents the whole city, but proclaimed – “I do not believe in quotas.”

Upon hearing this proclamation, it struck me that the stigma against so-called quotas which began on the right wing of the political spectrum in Canada – as part of a conservative “commonsense revolution,” – has now clearly infiltrated the entire political spectrum and has even seemingly infected left-leaning political sensibilities.

It also struck me that when someone says “I do not believe in quotas” they usually assume a taken-for-granted distinction between quotas that positively sort out their life, and quotas that negatively sort out their life. In short, there are quotas and there are quotas. Sorting systems that have a positive impact on the existing structure of mainstream life tend to be defined as part of the natural and normal operation of society. While sorting systems that have a negative impact on the mainstream tend to be defined and stigmatized as divisive and unfair abominations.

Consider the case in the United States of a boy named George Bush who was not a racial minority, and who applying to the prestigious Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass. By all accounts, it was a stretch for George to get into Andover, which then accepted only 20 percent of applicants over all, and fewer than half even of applicants whose fathers had attended. Inauspiciously, George had already been rejected by St. John's, a private school in Houston.

Andover ended up admitting young George for a couple of reasons. It wanted Texans to diversify its student body, which was heavily from the Northeast. In addition, using just the kind of point system that Mr. Bush now derides as quotas, Andover gave George three extra points on a 20-point scale for being the son of an alumnus. That's a higher percentage than a University of Michigan's affirmative action program awards an applicant for being Black.

A few years later, in gaining admission to Yale, Mr. Bush also enjoyed special preferences. He had never made honor roll at Andover (unlike 110 others in his class, according to his high school yearbook), and his SAT's of 566 verbal and 640 math were far below the median scores for students in his Yale class: 668 verbal and 718 math. But in the end, having a Yale pedigree, a grandfather on the Yale board and a Texas background bounced him into the entering class.

Today, however, it is Bush administration who told the U.S. Supreme Court that university admissions programs that gave an edge to minority students are unconstitutional and ignore race-neutral alternatives that could boost minority presence on campuses.

The administration urged the high court to strike down admissions policies at the University of Michigan and its law school. The admissions policies amount to unconstitutional

quota systems and unfairly discriminate against white students, the administration argued in a friend-of-the-court brief filed in the lawsuit challenging the Michigan school's practices.

Solicitor-General Theodore Olson wrote: "The court should hold that the university's race- and ethnic-based undergraduate admissions policies are unconstitutional because proven race-neutral alternatives to achieving the laudable goals of educational openness and diversity remain available."

"Both admissions policies fail the constitutional test of equal protection for everyone under the law and cannot be reconciled with previous Supreme Court rulings that severely limit the use of race as a factor in government decisions," claimed Olson, articulating administration's position.

Instead of mocking Mr. Bush for hypocrisy, though, we should focus on something else: Is he not living proof that affirmative action initiatives can succeed? If he was in part a diversity candidate, so what? He flourished at Andover and Yale, and classmates remember that he enlivened those academies by teaching them about drawls, scorpions and exuberance. Eventually he returned to his roots, cross-fertilizing both New England and west Texas.

In the end, affirmative action, employment equity and other diversity initiatives are always going to be tough issues because, as Nicholas D. Kristoff put it, "they reflect the collision between two aspirations — diversity and meritocracy — all in the hyper-sensitive zone of race." However, I would argue that stigmatizing any and all diversity initiatives out of hand as dirty little race quotas has been particularly effective as a political power tool for manipulating public discourse, but such derision has also been as divisive and unfair as detractor claim are the undergraduate admissions policies of the University of Michigan. It is a mistake to consider preferences for Blacks and other racialized minorities in isolation. How can we evaluate the justice of preferences that favor racialized minorities without considering preferences that benefit Whites (legacy), the wealthy (children of donors), and yes, long-tall Texans with (privileged) names like Bush.

Both above and below the 49th parallel, change is much less linear, then some think; and there are multiple narratives, and not just one. In this respect, in Toronto, the heartland of Canadian industrial power, our first order of business as we consider our preferences for a 21st century mayor is to discern between the candidates that talk a good diversity game and those that can help us to actualize our diversity in a multidimensional and multi-faceted world.

The upshot here is, with all due deference to mayoral frontrunner David Miller, I would like to suggest the political issue for the electorate in the upcoming election is not whether a mayoral candidate believes or does not believe in quotas. The real issue is, whether a mayoral candidate believes in exploring all the possibilities at their disposal in the pursuit of social equality in the mixed universe of our city.