



An Open Letter To Premier McGuinty On Human Rights

By Dr. Lorne Foster

Mr. McGuinty, all that we asked was that you listen. African Canadians are major stakeholders in any reform of the human rights system. We wanted you to listen to those who have their lives on the line, and not just their livelihoods. We wanted you to listen to those for whom human rights protections are a necessity, not merely an exercise in manufacturing consent. But on November 21, 2006, you decide to stop listening by invoking “closure” on Bill 107, and shutting down the public hearings on human rights in the province of Ontario.

We hoped you would listen to our concerns like a true statesman – like your predecessor Premier Leslie Frost long ago listened with genuine concern and consternation to “The Dresden Story” and the reality of racialized communities in his day.

In Frost's day, the vocal resistance to the dehumanization of people of colour was stigmatized as the subversive rantings of a few “communist thugs”. The dissent of minorities was easily dismissed because the discourse on racism and human rights was controlled by a privileged class of White opinion makers who effectively denied that racial discrimination even existed.

Today, the privilege class of predominately White lawyers, and opinion makers in politics, media and neo-conservative academia -- the architects of Bill 107, the bill to reform the Human Rights Act -- don't deny that racism exist, and they don't speak against minorities as in the past, they believe that it is their right to speak for them.

Today, resistance to Bill 107 is characterized as the narcissism of “special interest” groups using wheelchairs, canes and colour to get their own way, and to abuse the democratic process.

The architects of Bill 107 espouse principles of democracy and social justice, but at the same time they insist on dictating to minorities what best protects their rights, who is in the position to best protect them, and how they are going to be protected.

Mr. McGuinty, if you would have listened closely, you would have recognized the irony in that those who speak with authority in support of the changes in Bill 107 are those who through their White privilege have the least need for its protection.

Prior to the early 1950s, when there was little in the way of human rights protection for minorities, it was Frost who demonstrated the ability to listen to the voices outside the consensus of the privileged class. Records indicate that many among Frost's own caucus, while publicly denouncing discrimination, often denied that it constituted a serious problem, and took fierce exception to the “insubordination” of those minorities who chose to question the existing social order. But, Frost took the time to listen to the story of a small nondescript town in Southern Ontario, where the Canadian version of “Jim Crow” was alive and well, and people of colour were being publicly degraded and dehumanized.

The Dresden Story unfolded over the course of the "Underground Railroad" for fugitive slaves in the 19th century, through Uncle Tom's cabin, to sit-ins at Kay's Café. But the story

ended with Frost's ground breaking legislation ushering in laws prohibiting discrimination in housing and public places through the "Fair Accommodations Act", and laws prohibiting discrimination in hiring through the "Fair Employment Practices Act", and measures leading to the integral establishment of the "Ontario Human Rights Commission".

Mr. McGuinty, if you would have listened closely, you could have heard the spirit of Leslie Frost say that this was your Dresden Story, this was your opportunity to earn the respect of this province's minorities, by listening to the voices outside of the consensus of the privileged class, and empowering the full spectrum of Ontario's citizen democracy.

But you didn't listen.

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