



Collateral Damage For Blacks

By Dr. Lorne Foster

As a prominent cabinet minister of the Conservative party expressed it at the time, Ontario's former attempt to actively promote a representative workforce through Employment Equity legislation was "tantamount to reverse discrimination and that's why we got rid of it in the first place." The Minister went on to confidently expound that "scrapping those quota laws," via the *Job Quotas Repeal Act* of 1995, "has provided employers with an incentive to create jobs and encourage equal opportunity for all employees."

However, since the triumph of the Common Sense Revolution in 1995, there have been more Blacks in Ontario without jobs every year, and many, especially young males, are dropping out of the labour force entirely. More and more Black youth, including many who are no longer in school, are obtaining no job experience at all. Meanwhile, given that research shows joblessness during youth has a harmful impact on one's future success in the job market, the problems of the 21st century urban Black underclass are guaranteed to be crippling for decades to come.

This begs a cross-examination: Is it possible to see the plight of at-risk Black youth in Ontario today as the collateral damage caused by the successful onslaught of the Common Sense Revolution and *The Job Quotas Repeal Act*? Or is the plight of Black youth in Ontario a result of self-destructive tendencies caused by their own biogenetic or cultural traits?

In order to make a sound determination here one might first consider this. Many of the same people who see the plight of Black youth as primarily a personal responsibility and shortcoming have no difficulty at all understanding the concept of "*collateral damage*", and how people can be involuntarily exposed to radiating and consequential forces beyond their control.

For instance, when United Airlines (UAL) recently filed for bankruptcy, the gravity of the situation, and managerial culpability, was assessed on the basis of a wider context of financial linkages. Indeed, the UAL financial collapse put a pall on the entirety of Wall Street and the securities markets, because investors easily understood the destructive potential and reality of collateral damage. With more than \$21bn in liabilities and a list of creditors that runs to 32,000 pages, the Dow Jones Industrial Average immediately fell 172.36 points to 8,473.41, and the broader S&P 500 eased 20.23 to 892.00, while the Nasdaq Composite lost 55.31, or 3.9 percent, to 1,367.13.

Of course, the concept of collateral damage originated as an American military euphemism for the unintended or accidental deaths of noncombatants like women and children who happen to find themselves in the immediate vicinity of the concentration of deadly force "justifiably" directed at a specific target.

In the 1960s during the War in Viet Nam, for example, a American military spokesman might have reported, "We wiped the Viet Cong out of the village, but there was some collateral

damage.” Translation – we napalmed the whole village, and all that's left is a crater. During the Gulf War against Iraq a typical American military briefing might have gone something like this, “Our smart bombs were laser beamed onto the Republican Guard Headquarters and destroyed the target with limited collateral damage.” Translation – some of the multi-million dollar high tech missiles hit the target and some hit Abdulla’s Seven-Eleven two miles away.

Today the concept of collateral damage has acquired a versatility and broad currency in mainstream thinking, as a processing tool that makes linkages between context and consequences, and draws moral inferences from those linkages. Or to put it another way, to talk about collateral damage in a military, financial, or other context is to recognize that standards and principles are not neutral and do not occur in a vacuum. Indeed, this linkage-thought-process is now routine and adaptable to many spheres of social life experience except, it seems, the area of race relations.

The Job Quotas Repeal Act is the quintessential case in point. It hinges on the principle of equality of opportunity, and the idea that treating everyone equally is sufficient to ensure fairness in the workplace. Therefore, it assumes that all individuals regardless of race, creed or colour can have an unencumbered relationship to the goods and resources of society, and so, there are no real racial disparities only competitive ones. Here, the Act is actually absent to the very possibility of negative consequences arising from the application of equal standards to unequal situations. Consequently, it does not acknowledge the very thing that we know about collateral damage – that context and consequences matter; and they are as important as abstract principles of equal opportunity in righting wrongs.

American military strategists recognize that the undifferentiated treatment of innocents can lead to unintended battlefield devastation, and therefore, reasonable precautions are required to ensure their safety. But, Ontario Conservative party political strategists do not see (or will not acknowledge) that the undifferentiated treatment and blanket application of workplace standards merely freezes the status quo, and can have debilitating effects on disadvantaged minorities – therefore, reasonable accommodation is required to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate.

Today, closing in on a decade after the Common Sense Revolution and *The Job Quotas Repeal Act*, any map of Toronto showing the distribution of public and low-income housing in the city, can be identically superimposed on a map of the concentration of children living in poverty, which in turn can be identically superimposed on a map showing the locations of gun-related deaths and the proliferation of patterns of Black-on-Black gang violence.

When all is said and done, and it comes time to assess responsibility for the individual shortcomings and self-destructive tendencies of our at-risk Black youth, there are no sound inferences that can be drawn outside of the context of power relations, opportunity structures, discriminatory barriers, and above all the collateral damage of workplace legislation and practices.