



Race Committee Ends on Sour Note

By Dr. Lorne Foster

Did you know that the City of Toronto has an advisory committee made up of concerned citizens and community leaders with the mandate to deal with issues of inequality in the city?

Well neither did the advisory committee. At least that seems to be the consensus of its members.

The official name of the committee, which recently held the very last meeting of its three-year term, is "*The Community Advisory Committee on Race and Ethnic Relations*" (aka the RERAC). And it was charged with the proactive responsibility of standing-watch between Toronto's multicultural communities and its political decision-making apparatus in order to enhance citizen democracy.

Now, as the committee's tenure has come to a close, many members question the success of their enterprise. As they have now come to learn, in order to be effective a citizen advisory committee has to have direct passage and accountability to the City Council and not have to circumnavigate the City bureaucracy. However, as they see it, much of their advise over the last few years got lost in the various administrative branches and municipal government departments, tabled on some bureaucrats desk, and never quite made it to the ears of political decision-makers.

J. Gerald Rose, a member of the committee, summed up his three-year experience this way: "We spent a lot of time talking about what should be done, and not enough time doing ... [because] too much control was not in our hands [and] not enough ideas got to city council ... Our decisions were filtered and interpreted by the City bureaucracy, resulting in a mockery of our intentions."

Another committee member, Michael G. Somers, stated: "Unfortunately, I found the experience one of lost opportunity. The process, the structure of the committee was developed for failure. In the final analysis it was developed so the City could say there was some input and participation by its citizens on equality and race issues. But in reality it was just lip service, to silence real participatory democracy and the use of the City's greatest assets, its people."

In the words of Morley Wolfe – perhaps the most soldiered committee member and a distinguished anti-racism and human rights expert – to reach a more comprehensive approach to access and equity in the City, "the proper undertaking [of the RERAC] is to function as a 'user-friendly' diversity advocate ... [through] broader community outreach and as a more directed political liaison."

How did we get to this Mega-City impasse in participatory citizen democracy?

Well it all began in 1998, with a consultative study report from a Task Force on Community Access and Equity presented to the then newly amalgamated Toronto City Council. In its report, the Task Force concluded in part that "large numbers of Toronto's population continue to be marginalized and excluded from the mainstream of Toronto life[and] that the

City of Toronto must take a fuller and more comprehensive approach to dealing with the issues of access and equity than has been attempted thus far.”

Part of this comprehensive approach to a more accessible and equitable city recommended the creation of the Race and Ethnic Relations Community Advisory Committee which met for the first time on February 27th, 2001. At its inaugural meeting, the citizen committee received the report from the City Clerk advising that City Council at its meeting on October 3, 4 and 5th, 2000 appointed eighteen community leaders and activists from across Toronto’s multicultural spectrum – with the mandate to provide guidance and advice to Toronto residents, all sectors of government, and the institutional sector in matters of social inequality.

Now, at the end of its term, the RERAC is preparing an advisory report of its own, which is currently in draft form, and scheduled to be completed by early December. The draft report, written by Dr. Maria Wallis and Alana Butler, and accepted by the committee in principle, currently contains a review of the “Context” in which the committee came about; the “Reflections” of the members on the committee process; and most importantly, “Recommendations” advising procedural and structural changes for dealing with disparities and inequalities in the City of Toronto.

Reviewing its work over three years, the committee’s tenure has not expired totally without distinction. In the summary of activities and accomplishments it is noted that the RERAC initiated several practical undertakings. It (1) established a World Conference subcommittee to outline a position paper on the Development of a City of Toronto Declaration and Plan of Action [in regard to and] as a follow-up to The United Nations Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance ; (2) reviewed the City’s drafted Social Development Strategy Report; (3) dialogued with the Task Force on Community Safety; (4) introduced the concept of promoting diversity within the City of Toronto in the form of designating a Diversity Day; (5) organized a multi-faith summit; and (6) chartered a racial profiling declaration.

However, reflecting on the process as a whole, it is the consensus of the advisory committee that more substantive efforts have to be made to go beyond the rhetoric of diversity and beyond celebrating the cosmetic diversity of Toronto’s neighbourhoods.

It is in this respect, the advisory ends its appointment and its report to the City on an emphatic note of invocation – “The City of Toronto must seize the moment to prevail over social inequities to be the showcase of social justice ...We have high hopes for the next City of Toronto Race and Ethnic Relations Community Advisory Committee (s).”