



TORONTO CITY COUNCIL, FREE SPEECH, PRIDE WEEK FUNDING AND QUAIA

Toronto City Council will meet on June 14 to make a final decision about whether or not to adopt a report that has determined that the use of the term “Israeli apartheid” does not violate the City’s Anti-Discrimination Policy. The Council’s decision has profound implications for freedom of expression in Toronto. For over a year, pro-Israel lobbyists have been trying to block funding of gay Pride Week, because one participant – Queers Against Israeli Apartheid – has been participating. In 2010, they almost succeeded in getting funding for Pride Week cut by accusing Pride Week and QuAIA of violating anti-discrimination laws by making reference to, and carrying signs reading “Israeli Apartheid.”

Following the 2010 Pride parade—in which QuAIA participated—the Council instructed City staff to determine if Pride organizers would be violating the City’s Anti-Discrimination Policy (ADP) if QuAIA participated in the Parade. The Council also decided to delay disbursement of funding for the 2011 Pride Week until after the 2011 Parade takes place. On April 2, the City Manager submitted the staff report. It concluded that the use of the term “Israeli apartheid” does not, in and of itself, violate the city’s ADP nor does it constitute hate speech under Ontario or Canadian law. From that determination flowed two others: that QuAIA’s participation in the Pride Parade does not violate the ADP and that the City cannot ban QuAIA’s signs or banners.

Although vindicated by the report, QuAIA withdrew its application to march in the 2011 Pride Parade, in order to prevent its participation from being used as a pretext to cut City funding to Pride Week. On May 24, the Toronto City Council’s Executive Committee adopted the City Manager’s report after animated deputations from 46 organizations and individuals—28 defending the report and 18 opposing it.

It is now crucial that people valuing freedom of expression take action to ensure that on June 14 City Council as a whole does not cave in to pressure from pro-Israel lobbyists to reject the City manager’s report and to cut funding for Pride Week. Please write to Toronto City Councillors to urge them to safeguard free speech in Canada, adopt the report and to provide the usual allocation for Pride Week activities.

Points to Emphasize:

1. The use of the term “Israeli Apartheid” does not violate the City’s Anti-Discrimination Policy (ADP), nor does it violate Ontario’s Human Rights Code or Canada’s Criminal code provisions regarding hate speech.
2. QuAIA itself has not violated the City’s Anti-Discrimination Policy, and therefore City Council should refuse to pressure Pride Week organizers into excluding QuAIA from future Pride Parades by threatening funding cuts or delays.
3. The attempt to silence critics of Israel by intimidating community organizations that allow them to have a presence at their events or that rent space to them is a freedom of expression issue. Even if councillors do not agree that Israeli laws and practices gravely discriminate against Palestinians, they should firmly oppose attempts to silence Torontonians who do.
4. QuAIA is not marching in the 2011 Pride Parade, so there is no reason for any further delay in disbursing Pride Week’s customary funding.
5. Toronto City Council should promptly disburse the customary allocation for Pride organizers prior to Pride Week, as it used to. It would be discriminatory for Council to single out Pride Week for postponement of funding and for onerous requirements to prove compliance with the City’s ADP.