

Human rights commissions and their disdain for democracy

The Halifax *Chronicle-Herald*, Wednesday 9 July 2008, p. A9

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Last summer, the mayor and council of Truro, Nova Scotia, rejected a request that the town fly a gay pride flag. The mayor and council then misspoke their reasons for rejecting the request, wrongly saying that flying flags was against town policy. To top it off, the mayor offered for public edification a few of his opinions regarding homosexuality.

And so Truro Pride called in the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission (NSHRC).

As of a month ago, Truro's affirmative action programme provides gay and lesbian job seekers preferential treatment on the grounds of their sexual orientation. The mayor and the town councillors will attend sessions to raise their awareness of their attitudes towards homosexuality and the status of homosexuals in their community. The citizens of Truro themselves can expect to see public programmes aimed at changing whatever negative feelings they might harbour toward gays and lesbians. And the town has a brand new, written-down, NSHRC-approved policy regarding flags and banners on municipal property.

The Truro Daily News, in a June 10 editorial, heralded these changes as a step in the right direction and congratulated council for its commitment to making them.

The *Daily News* is mistaken. Truro has not taken a step in the right direction. It has been frogmarched.

Whatever one thinks of Truro's new gay-friendly stance, one ought to be shocked and appalled at the way in which it has come to take it. Truro's mayor and town councillors did not come to their new attitudes and policies by thinking the matter over and reacting to their constituents' views, as responsible politicians should. Their changes of heart are not even the result of their desire to do well in the next election. No, everything new in the council's attitudes toward homosexuality is there as a result of the NSHRC. The NSHRC forced the mayor and the councillors to toe a line whether they wanted to or not, or face punishment.

One result of this, we can expect, is that Truro politicians will become even less candid and forthright than they were previously apt to be. Already Truro's mayor won't answer any question about homosexuality or the town's new direction without reading from an approved script. How will voters in Truro come to know which candidates for town office will act strongly and out of sincere commitment to make Truro friendly and welcoming to gays and lesbians? The answer is that they won't know, for everyone is on board now, whether they're there sincerely or not.

What of the awareness sessions Truro politicians will attend? Might not good come of these sessions? No, of course not, for true education occurs only when dissenting voices are heard and understood. These sessions are not going to be classrooms in which people, after having been informed of the relevant facts and figures, discuss the plight and the aspirations of gays and lesbians. They will, instead, be indoctrination or re-education sessions. They will aim simply at instilling the correct attitudes and beliefs in Truro's politically reprobate councillors.

But neither the blow to candour in politics nor the construction of re-education camps half a world away from China is what is worst about the authoritarian meddling of the NSHRC. Both pale in comparison to what the NSHRC has done to democracy in Truro.

The NSHRC has usurped the responsibility of the elected officials of Truro to make and apply policy. The NSHRC has taken from the hands of these officials what the people of Truro rightly expected would be in their hands, and in no one else's. The town of Truro is no longer administered by the town council of Truro.

The NSHRC has, as well, removed from the citizens of Truro their prerogative—indeed, their pleasure—to discipline their politicians as they see fit. The intolerance and foolishness of the mayor and the town council is properly a matter for the residents and voters of Truro, and for them alone. It's not a matter for unelected, bullying, provincial bureaucrats. Throw the bums out, or don't. But it's exclusively for the people of Truro to find and make the appropriate response.

Truro is not the first municipality in Canada to receive its orders from a human rights agency. In 1997, London Mayor Dianne Haskett ran afoul of the Ontario human rights board of inquiry. The board had ruled that Haskett, as mayor, must issue a gay pride proclamation. Haskett refused. Issuing such a proclamation, Haskett said, would violate her settled policy not to issue controversial proclamations that might incite hatred toward any group. (Haskett had earlier refused to proclaim a Chastity Week.) Haskett and the City of London were fined \$10,000.

Mayor Haskett earned the respect of her constituents by refusing to have anything to do with the farce of a mandated proclamation. Her constituents returned her to office in a landslide. Truro's mayor and councillors have not been so conscientious with regard to the farce of a mandated awareness-raising programme.

To London and Truro we can add Kelowna, BC, Hamilton, Ontario, and other cities. All across Canada, human rights agencies have usurped the powers of municipalities and the prerogatives of their citizens.

The matter of the anti-democratic policies and practices of our nation's various human rights agencies is a problem for all of us. The Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission is an unelected group of authoritarian ideologues happy to impose its will on democratic institutions and to come between the people and their elected leaders. Few provincial human rights agencies in Canada are any different.

We Canadians must hold our provincial governments and our provincial politicians responsible for this sad state of affairs, for it is governments and politicians who have set the statutes under which these agencies operate and who have tolerated each of the many abuses these agencies have committed. Canadians should support no politician unwilling to discipline the human rights agency over which his or her legislature has jurisdiction.

We must insist with our votes that our politicians ensure that human rights agencies no longer interfere with democracy.