

It's A Wonderful Life: Hamilton Style

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It's A Wonderful Life is my favourite Christmas movie. It concludes (SPOILER ALERT!) with the community rallying around the film's protagonist, George Bailey, in his time of crisis and financial need.

Cameron Kroetsch, former Chair of Hamilton's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) Advisory Committee, had the same experience when he lost his case against the City in regards to the Integrity Commissioner's investigation into him and Council's decision to punish him.

Council's claims that he breached privacy and violated the City's Codes of Conduct were embarrassingly transparent. Using the Integrity Commissioner to go after a citizen volunteer was an excessive abuse of power.

The Court's decision that a volunteer advisory committee should be considered a local board as per Ontario's Municipal Act has very troubling ramifications. Their rationale gave justification for the City and Integrity Commissioner to investigate and punish Kroetsch.

20 years ago, I was one of several members of Hamilton's LGBTQ community who sat with then Mayor Bob Wade along with his Chief of Staff Maureen Wilson to discuss the creation of an LGBTQ Advisory Committee. None of us envisioned a future where committee members would be investigated and punished for publicly speaking out against the oppression faced by LGBTQ Hamiltonians due to the actions of their Municipal Government.

When I was the Acting Chair of the LGBTQ Advisory Committee I along with several members of my LGBTQ community publicly rebuked the Deputy Police Chief and members of the Multi-Agency Task Force in front of the media for their raid of a local Bathhouse ... at

City Hall. No City Staff or Councillors ever pulled me aside to have a word with me to discuss my inappropriate behaviour.

The creation of the LGBTQ Advisory committee was an action to repair the rift between the City and Hamilton's LGBTQ community from Hamilton's previous Mayor, Bob Morrow, who refused to proclaim Hamilton first Gay Pride Day in 1991. The Ontario Human Rights Commission fined Morrow \$5000.

Our role as LGBTQ Advisory Committee members was to provide a queer lens on the business of the Municipality by giving input on policies, bylaws and more. The attitude 20 years ago was one of gratitude. We were providing a valuable service to our City. Free of charge.

We weren't a board. We had no power. We had a budget of a couple hundred bucks, given to us by Council, to pay for sandwiches during meetings and help fund the odd community project. We couldn't directly affect any policies

or budget decisions made by the Municipality. If an effective and engaged Council Member was assigned to our committee they would take what we shared with them to Council Meetings and Staff. Our powers, so to speak, were always indirect.

The final kick in the teeth of the Court's decision was that Kroetsch was to pay all legal costs to the City of Hamilton in 30 days in the amount of \$15,000. Community members Sarah Jama and Craig Burley immediately organized a Go Fund Me Campaign. In less than a day, over 200 people donated \$15,000. It was a heartwarming moment that sent a clear signal that Hamiltonians were having none of it when it came to this abuse of power.

Ultimately, Kroetsch was punished for not "knowing his place". Our Municipal government has made the point of Advisory Committees made up of members of marginalized communities completely irrelevant by their punitive actions. To tell the volunteer members of

these Advisory Committees that they will be punished if they speak out publicly against the actions of the Municipality in relation to their treatment of their marginalized communities is antithetical to their very creation. The City has made their very existence nothing more than a performative display with no substance towards true Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.

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