

Three flags: A history of exclusion



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By Nate Smelle

For the past month or so the talk around town and online for the most part has been focused on inclusion and LGBTQ2S rights. This conversation became amplified last Tuesday evening during a public meeting held in Maynooth to discuss a proposed flag policy amendment in Hastings Highlands.

The obvious tension in the room that night, accented by the police presence, highlighted the fact that the amendment was a bone of contention for people on both sides of the issue. To the delight of the minority in the room council scrapped the amendment by a vote of four to two. The main reason for denying it, according to each of the four councillors voting against the amendment, was that flying non-official flags such as the rainbow flag would do more to incite divisions than it would to bring the community together. Ironically many municipalities throughout Ontario have decided to fly the rainbow flag because they believed it will make their community more inclusive. For this reason I am still struggling to understand how council's decision makes Hastings Highlands more inclusive.

As Councillor Nancy Matheson and Mayor Vic Bodnar pointed out, the amendment would allow up to 52 community groups, charities or organizations living and/or serving the public to promote their cause for a seven day period each year. Would not flying the rainbow flag and possibly the flags of 51 other groups, charities or organizations working to improve people's lives and the community, allow the municipality to engage with and support more of its residents?

With the four councillors voting against the amendment indicating that they believe the flags currently flying over the municipal offices ? the flags of Hastings County, Ontario and Canada ? are inclusive, I decided to look into the symbols on each of the flags to see exactly who and what they represent.

While sitting at the press table at the Hastings County council meeting a few weeks ago, I spotted a massive coat of arms ? the same coat of arms on the county flag ? on the wall behind the warden. Inscribed in Latin on this coat of arms are the words ?Nisi Dominus Frustra.? An abbreviation of verse 1 Psalm 127 in the Bible which states ?Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.? These three words ? the Hastings County motto ? loosely translated mean ?Without God, it is in vain.?

Holding up a crest full of heraldic symbols above these words from the outer edges are two bears, muzzled and chained to a pair of ragged wooden posts. Not a huge fan of chaining bears to posts, their imagery suggests the Christian notion of humanity's dominion over nature. Digging a little deeper I found that the emblems are also associated with a man named Arthgal, the Earl of Warwick at the time of King Arthur.

Developed in the European high Middle Ages ? a period of history beginning around the year 1000 and lasting until approximately 1250 ? heraldry is system of visual identification of rank and pedigree closely associated with the courtly culture of chivalry, Latin

Christianity, the Crusades, feudal aristocracy, and monarchy of the time. Although less ornate, like the Hastings County flag, the provincial flag of Ontario also possesses symbols of heraldry from the European high Middle Ages.

The national flag of Canada we see flying above government buildings today became official after receiving royal proclamation on Feb. 15, 1965 ? only a couple months prior to the adoption of the provincial flag in Ontario. While it does not feature any symbols from the European high Middle Ages, as we all know the iconic red maple leaf it does exhibit symbolizes unity, tolerance and peace. Nonetheless, as Indigenous activist, artist and co-founder of the music group A Tribe Called Red pointed out at a speaking event I attended in Ottawa last year, the maple tree did not make an appearance in Canada until 7,000 years after the Anishinaabe people of the Nipissing First Nation. Putting the maple leaf into the context of the history of this land we now call Canada, the national flag notably excludes the history of Indigenous peoples who have been here since time immemorial.

Though the three flags currently flying over Hastings Highlands municipal offices do represent a significant percentage of the population living in the area, I personally do not see any evidence that they represent the local Indigenous and LGBTQ2S communities.