

A place to stand

By Tony Pearson

When I was a young man, I got to experience the joy of centennial year ? 1967. I was living in Ottawa, and frequently travelled to Montreal to visit Expo 67. One of the highlights was a film at the Ontario pavilion called ?A Place To Stand.? The film pioneered new split-screen and multiple-imaging effects, highlighting the province's industries, arts, and people. These techniques, invented by Toronto's Chris Chapman, were later adopted by many films and countless commercials. Seen by millions of people, the film went on to win an Oscar.

Part of the attraction of the film was its song. For those who celebrated the centennial, the catchy ?Ontari-ari-ario? is an ear-worm, impossible to get out of your head. And now, it's back, stronger than ever.

The Ontario government has produced an ad for Canada's 150th anniversary, and it practically defines heart-warming. See it on YouTube anytime the news gets you down.

The ad takes a fresh approach about Ontario being a place to stand and a place to grow by featuring people who are often marginalized. It features an actual Syrian refugee girl, shown packing to leave, on a plane, being introduced into an Ontario classroom, and finally waving a sparkler at a fireworks display. In addition, there's a young gay man, an Ojibwa youth learning forestry, and a Vietnamese father immigrating to re-join his family ? again, all real people.

The song lyrics resonate in a new way ? ?a land of peace/where the free winds blow?; ?a place to live for you and me/with hopes as high as the tallest tree? ?and there's a new final tag at the end: ?A place for all of us.?

Which brings me to House of Commons motion 103. This resolution was introduced by MP Iqra Khalid last December. It seems quite reasonable, calling on Parliament to ?condemn Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination,? and asking the government to ?recognize the need to quell the increasing public climate of hate and fear.? It further urges the House of Commons to study how the government ?could develop a government-wide approach to reducing or eliminating systemic racism and religious discrimination, including Islamophobia.?

A similar resolution was also introduced into the Ontario legislature, where it was supported by the Liberals, Conservatives, and New Democrats.

However, a number of right wing groups, as well as some politicians pandering to anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment, have denounced the motion as an attempt to restrict free speech.

This free speech opposition is totally bogus. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association stated that the motion does not restrict free speech in any way. Remember, Canada already has laws prohibiting the incitement of racial and religious hatred, and the Supreme Court has ruled these laws constitutional, notably in a case involving anti-Semitic Alberta teacher Jim Keegstra. The court held that it is reasonable to stop people from promoting hatred of identifiable groups.

The need to put some restrictions on free speech was outlined long ago by American Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: ?Free speech does not give you the right to shout ?FIRE? in a crowded theatre.? And that's exactly the effect of hate speech ? to stampede people into dangerous action. That's why the right wing so often turns into the fright-wing ? attempting to scare people in order to turn them against each other.

The other argument against M-103 is that it singles out one group ? Muslims (as noted, the motion calls for action against all racial and religious discrimination). But as Conservative MP Michael Chong has pointed out, in the past five years the House of Commons has already passed motions denouncing hatred against Jews, Coptic Christians, and Yazidis. I don't recall any fuss over these motions.

January's terrorist killings at the Quebec City mosque show why a motion condemning Islamophobia is very germane at this time. So are the thousands of hate-filled emails and tweets sent to Khalid, telling her to ?go home,? (she has lived her whole adult life in Canada) and much worse ? including violent death threats.

The election of the abominable Donald Trump has opened the lid of a jar containing some very nasty prejudice. That's why I found the Ontario 150 ad so refreshing. It's often noted that we are a nation of immigrants ? everybody who's not aboriginal is from immigrant stock. Right now, nearly seven million Canadians (one out of five) are foreign-born. And by and large, Canadians support an open and welcoming society. Overwhelming majorities in public opinion polls express support for multi-culturalism. As I know from my days as a high school teacher, this is particularly true of youth. So I don't see any problem in calling for action to reduce prejudice.

Just remember: there was free speech in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s. But there were no restrictions on hate speech against Jews. And we all know what happened then.