A BAD START FOR 2011

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On Jan. 14 the Armenian National Committee of Toronto (ANCT) held a "town hall" meeting which was billed as an "interactive meeting to discuss ANCT issues and initiatives with community members." It was also meant to "serve as an opportunity to create a dialogue and strengthen the bonds between the community members and the ANCT executives."

The guest speaker was Toronto MP Rob Oliphant. What did Mr. Oliphant talk about? About his recent trip to Armenia. The politician regaled his audience with a tired travelogue, as if the audience had not been to Armenia or seen pictures of Khor Virab, Mount Ararat, Etchmiadzin a thousand times. The speech was heavy with travel-writing clichés and light on meaningful observations and facts. It sounded like a high school "How I spent my summer vacation" speech.

However, there was a more serious shortcoming to the politician's presentation. Mr. Oliphant put on his political pundit hat and lectured Armenians not just in Toronto and Canada, but Armenians in the Diaspora and in Armenia about Hye Tadd. He declaimed that Armenians should learn from Jews regarding the Holocaust and the Genocide. He said that Armenians should put the past (read Genocide) behind them to move forward. Armenians should do what Jews had done, said he.

While the comparison between the Jewish and Armenian tragedies is invidious and egregious, what was as disturbing was that no ANCT executive challenged Mr. Oliphant's false comparison. Shouldn't someone have told Mr. Oliphant that Germany has recognized the Holocaust, given billions of dollars to Jews and to Israel and is one of the major diplomatic/political/military/financial allies of Israel while Turkey continues to deny its butchery of 1.5 million innocent Armenians? Do we need lessons from a politician who has become an expert on Armenians and their destiny after spending a couple of days in Armenia?

It's standard procedure for event organizers to vet the speech of a speaker a priori. Did the ANCT know what Mr. Oliphant was going to say? If yes, why did they give the green light to the offensive "advice"?

This is the second ANCT fumble in as many months. In late 2010 its executives decided, without consultation with the community, to support a mayoralty candidate who had no links to the Armenian community. The candidate was soundly defeated. Since then the newly-elected mayor has had cordial meetings and photo-ops with another Armenian group which some consider a rival to ANCT.

The ANCT "town hall" event was attended by a mere 50 people--far short of the attendance one would have expected from such a community-wide gathering. The question arises whether the meeting was competently publicized.

The ANCT has a long history of admirable work on behalf of the Armenian Cause and Armenian national preservation. It's disappointing to see its recent missteps.

A few weeks later (Feb. 5) the Canada Armenia Business Council (CABC) held its annual banquet in a Toronto suburb. To commemorate the occasion, the CABC published a 20-page booklet which carried eight pages of advertisements. One of the full-page ads was inserted by the Mosaic Institute and the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council (TABDC). The ad was paid for by Vahan Kololian, who runs the Mosaic Institute (MI). Reports from insiders say that Mr. Kololian made the inclusion of the TABDC logo, including the Turkish flag, a condition of his purchasing the $1,000-page space.

The TABDC and MI ad was objectionable for several reasons.

At the bottom of the ad there was the following statement: "Partners in advocating opening the border and promoting free trade between Turkey and Armenia." At no time has the Republic of Armenia (ROA) advocated free trade with Turkey. Thanks to the subsidies many Turkish corporations receive from Ankara, thanks to the experience of Turkish businessmen, and thanks to the large domestic market Turkish corporations command, Armenia's economy would collapse within days if there was free trade between Yerevan and Ankara. On what basis and by whose authority do the two organizations flash their misguided motto remains a mystery. One thing is clear: The statement is blatant interference in the internal and foreign affairs of ROA by a business group with an agenda.

There's also a mystery about TABDC's leadership and financing. On its website main page, TABDC boasts: "More than a Business Group, co-established on 3 May, 1997 in Istanbul and in Yerevan, is the first and only official link between the public and private sectors in each of the two countries'

communities. The TABDC is co-chaired by Arsen Ghazarian and Kaan Soyak."

More than a business group, according to TABDC.

Although Ghazarian is cited as TABDC co-chair, of the 43 news releases (listed on the main web page), 27 have Soyak's name in their headlines. Mr. Ghazarian? He is mentioned once. Reading the website one inevitably reaches to the conclusion that hugely invisible Mr. Ghazarian is no more than a figurehead.

Who is Kaan Soyak? He is an Istanbul businessman who frequently visits North America. He is a staunch supporter of the discredited protocols between Armenia and Turkey. Indeed, the TABDC website still lists a number of articles in support of the defunct protocols.

Who funds the activities of TABDC? Is it the Turkish business establishment?

We believe in talking with Turks so as to resolve our differences, but TABDC is not the right medium for such a conversation. Intentionally or unintentionally, TABDC provides a fig leaf for Turkish propaganda… to divert and distract us from Hye Tad … and enable Turkey to claim that all's well between the two nations and the two states, although Turkey denies its horrific crimes and continues to blockade Armenia.

Who is Mr. Kololian? He is an Armenian-Canadian businessman, based in Toronto. He runs MI. The insertion of the ad in the CABC booklet wasn't his only disappointing act this past year. Last April he appeared on a nationwide television program to discuss the Genocide of Armenians. The moderator was Turkish and so was Kololian's co-panelist Demir Delen. The latter is the past-president of the Federation of Canadian-Turkish Associations. He is a professional Genocide denier who lectures on how "Armenians killed Turks." During the discussion, Mr. Kololian described the Genocide as "a controversial subject" and made no attempt to refute Mr. Delen's well-versed boilerplate propaganda. He also didn't interject Dalan when the latter transformed the discussion into an apparent "treatise" on Armenian terrorists of the '80s. Furthermore, Kololian didn't provide a rebuttal when Delen falsely stated Canada was the only country which recognized the Genocide. A painful mismatch by any measure.

Did the full CABC executive know about the content of Mr. Kololian's ad? If yes, why did it approve its publication? It couldn't have been the allure of $1,000? Does CABC have procedures in place whereby the content (editorial and advertising) of its program booklets is checked? Was the publishing of the ad a failure to exercise oversight?

The CABC is a valuable organization which has done commendable work. In this instance it failed to

put the dots and cross the "tees". Once the credibility of an organization is harmed, it's difficult to restore it. We hope CABC and ANCT learn from their recent stumbles and avoid consequences which could harm Hye Tad. Armenians can't afford to make too many mistakes. The enemy is too strong; the enemy is ever alert to undermine our efforts.