NOTHING LIKE A HEALTHY DOSE OF FREE SPEECH

Posted on July 28, 2009 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By Michael Taube, The Toronto Star , 28 July 2009

Michael Taube is a former speech writer for Prime Minister Stephen Harper. He received his master's degree in comparative politics from the London School of Economics in 1995.
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Fifteen years ago when I was taking my master's degree in the U.K., I saw many things I would have liked to bring back to Toronto.

The historical landmarks, beautiful architecture, priceless paintings and fantastic pubs were high on my list.
But there was one thing I really wanted to bring back – the sights and sounds of the most glorious expression of free speech I'd ever seen.

In 1872, the British Parliament passed the Royal Parks and Gardens Regulation Act, which designated the northeastern corner of historic Hyde Park for public speaking. Since that time, people have congregated every Sunday at that location, known as Speakers' Corner, to debate everything under the sun. A few famous visitors have also popped up as participants and guests, including Karl Marx and George Orwell.

Here's how it works. All the speakers stand on makeshift soapboxes, talking or sometimes yelling to get their point across. Some read from notes, while others challenge or debate people in the crowd.

The speakers represent every position you could possibly think of.

There are radical Muslims, neo-Nazis, Communists, religious Jews and opponents of Christianity. There are also speakers in favour of traditional marriage, gay rights, Palestine, the Nation of Islam and even legalized marijuana.

Unlike our federal and provincial parliaments, where there is some procedure and decorum (although less so in recent years), this type of debate is a free-for-all. There seems to be only one unwritten rule at Speakers' Corner – free speech must be tolerated by all participants and observers,

and by all friends and foes.

Except for a few isolated incidents, the only type of assault one finds at Hyde Park is that of a verbal nature.

Could the speakers' corner concept be recreated in other cities? Certainly, and Toronto would be a great choice.

In fact, our city has its own Hyde Park of sorts – the aptly named High Park. If an area in High Park were designated for free speech advocates every Sunday, imagine the crowds that would turn out.

True, a free speech zone in High Park would drive civil libertarians and human rights commissions up the wall. But a healthy dose of free speech might also help drive them out of business. In my books, that would be a positive and healthy development for the city.

It's one thing to speak in favour of free speech, but it's quite another to promote this basic concept of freedom.

Many so-called "defenders" of free speech often change their tune when they hear ideas that they either find offensive or that don't fit in with their jaded world view. But that's not what free speech is about.

Rather, it is the defence of ideas that are either objective or objectionable. We have to support views that appear right to us and tolerate views that appear wrong to us. We don't have to agree with an opposing viewpoint, but we must defend a person's right to support a position in a non-violent manner.

By designating a speakers' corner in High Park, Torontonians would be exposed to a greater degree of thought. They would also gain the ability to make their own judgments on issues without being told what to think by others.

It's worked in London's Hyde Park for more than a century. There's no reason why it couldn't also work here in Toronto's High Park.

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