

REFLECTIONS ON A GENOCIDE COMMEMORATION

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On April 23 the Armenian community of Toronto gathered at the Armenian Youth Centre to commemorate the anniversary of the Genocide of Armenians. The gathering was organized by the joint commemoration committee representing various local organizations.

Two federal and one provincial ministers, in addition to a number of federal, provincial, and municipal representatives, attended the event.

Compared to previous years, this year's attendance was poor, reflecting negatively on the occasion and raising questions about the priorities of our community in addition to the communications-promotional acumen of event organizers. If we cannot show our commitment and seriousness to the memory of our martyrs on the one issue which unites us around the globe, how can we expect "odars" to take us seriously and to support us?

The meager attendance was not the only setback of the event. The catastrophe started when the organizers invited Martha Hall Findlay, a Liberal Member of Parliament (she lost her seat at the federal elections ten days later) to address the gathering. Inexplicably, her remarks focused on her mother's illness and death, which, of course, had no connection to the commemoration. However, the insulting part of her speech was her refusal to use the word "genocide" to describe what happened to Armenians in 1915. She coyly referred to the Genocide as "man's inhumanity to man." That and 50 cents will not get you a cup of coffee.

Ms. Findlay's denialist stand on the Genocide of Armenians was not a new or surprising development. On many occasions she has expressed identical views to leading members of a usually activist and influential Toronto Armenian organization. Thus it is ironic that these same Armenian leaders, who profess to be politically astute, would commit such a blunder and invite a politician whose stand on the Genocide is no secret. It was sheer torture to listen to Ms. Findlay's regrettable remarks. Her Liberal caucus member, an exasperated John Cannis, couldn't take her demeaning remarks and left the gathering in protest.

If Mr. Cannis' disgust was not sufficiently clear message to the event organizers, the next two speakers--provincial representatives Conservative Peter Shurman and New Democratic Party's (NDP) Michael Prue--gave the organizers timely instruction in politicking and lobbying 101. Mr. Shurman cited his colleague, Frank Klees', motion to declare April 24 as "Armenian Genocide

Memorial Day" in Ontario.

Mr. Shurman said that the motion has been on the Ontario legislature's agenda for a long time, waiting for the consent of the Liberal Party and the cooperation of interested parties. He added that his party is committed to the motion and would stand by it. Mr. Prue stated that the NDP has already co-sponsored Mr. Klees' motion. He pointed out that Liberal MPP Tony Ruprecht, (a pro-Turkish Toronto politician) is working hand-in-glove with the Turkish consul general in Toronto to defeat the motion. He further said that the consul general is putting pressure on him to withdraw his co-sponsorship of the motion. Thanks to Mr. Ruprecht's efforts, the Turkish consul general is a regular visitor at Queen's Park where he hosts receptions for politicians to spread his government's twisted version of history.

Another mind-boggling aspect of this year's amateurish commemoration was the invitation to MP Yasmin Ratansi, a federal politician with a long history of anti-Armenian activities--from Genocide negation to support of Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. To add insult to injury, Ms. Ratansi, who has organized familiarization trips to Azerbaijan for federal politicians, was invited to be interviewed on the "Nor Hai Horizon" TV program. What did the people, who extended invitation to the politician, hope she would say on TV? Incidentally, ten days later, Ms. Ratansi lost the election to a newcomer.

A most disconcerting aspect of Mr. Shurman's and Mr. Prue's statements was that certain members of a Toronto Armenian organization are fully aware of the initiatives and activities being developed in and around Queens Park vis-à-vis the Armenian Genocide and yet they did nothing to counteract these hostile moves, to defend the memory of our martyrs and to uphold the historic truth. It is a disgrace that honorable MPPs, who recognize the Genocide, are left to defend on their own their moral convictions against vicious assaults by the well-oiled denialist machine. What reasonable Armenian would expect these courageous politicians would continue to fight for us when we have abandoned them in such a cavalier manner?

A small group of wannabe lobbyists in the above-mentioned Armenian organization is doing a big disservice to the Armenian Cause and to their organization's history--an organization with a long history in the struggle to defend the interests of the Armenian community in Canada.

It was the national organization of this local chapter which has worked, since 1980, to secure the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the Senate, the House of Commons, and the Government of Canada. Furthermore, the same organization has worked diligently to secure Armenian Genocide education curriculum in British Columbia, Quebec and Toronto.

This tiny coterie of Armenian "lobbyists" are also doing disservice to the hundreds of their organization's members and to volunteers who have devoted so much of their time and financial resources to uphold and to defend Armenian rights. This handful of people--supposedly responsible for representing Armenian interests in Ontario--persist to blemish the stellar record of their

organization through their less than satisfactory efforts. What a shame.

