'VERY UGLY SILENCE' BROKEN AS MPPS COME TOGETHER TO MARK UKRAINE FAMINE

Posted on April 12, 2009 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By Jim Coyle,The Toronto Star , 10 April 2009

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Yesterday, it occurred when MPP Dave Levac left his seat and met in the middle of the Legislature floor colleagues Frank Klees and Cheri DiNovo.

There, the three legislators shook hands, hugged briefly (if perhaps just a bit awkwardly), then turned to lead the chamber in applauding the Ukrainian-Canadian visitors in the galleries.

Levac (L–Brant), Klees (PC–Newmarket-Aurora) and DiNovo (NDP–Parkdale-High Park) come from three different parties, so their collaboration was as novel as it was uplifting. Together, they had drafted the province's first-ever tri-sponsored private members' bill. And it had just passed third reading to establish the fourth Saturday in November each year as Holodomor Memorial Day.

The memorial day, Levac said, will provide an opportunity to reflect on and to educate the public about crimes against humanity that occurred in Ukraine from 1932 to 1933 under the Stalin regime, when as many as 10 million people perished in a man-made famine and genocide.

In winning passage of the bill, there was, Levac said, a compelling human imperative at play – an obligation to "speak of the unspeakable."

There was no better bill than this to have produced such historic collaboration, DiNovo has said.

"A very ugly silence has been broken," she said. Voices have been raised around the world now in Ontario to say "This happened."

During debate on the bill, DiNovo told of how a member of the Toronto congregation at which she was pastor once came to her and asked: "Do you think God will forgive me?

"I couldn't imagine what this sweet little old lady had ever done," DiNovo said. "And she said, `I would ask forgiveness for having tasted, having eaten, human flesh.'

"Because it was during the Holodomor that families who were trying to keep their children alive had to," DiNovo told the House. "They were driven to engage in cannibalism of those who had dropped by the wayside.

"Imagine being confronted by that," she said. "What I don't think God would understand is if we keep silent about it, if we do nothing about it.

"The very bones of the victims cry out for this day to be acknowledged, for this genocide to be named."

The name speaks for itself, based on two Ukrainian words — "holod," meaning hunger, starvation, famine; and "moryty," to induce suffering, to kill.

Klees said a tragedy in which, at its worst, 25,000 people died every single day in a region considered the Soviet Union's breadbasket, traumatized a nation, leaving its people "with deep social, psychological, political" scars.

To be sure, famine wounds a people's soul forever. Nothing, not even massacre, says the writer Thomas Keneally, has the effect on the folk memory that famine does.

The memory of hunger, he said, might be worse than the memory of terror. Generations on, the fear of it echoes down ancestral lines, those who've heard the stories never confident the worst of losses won't recur. Memories of African famines of contemporary times will last, Keneally predicted, "into the 22nd century."

Those who fought long and hard to have Holodomor commemorated deserve the Legislature's thanks, DiNovo said.

"You are an example to the world, to those who deny oppression and who deny totalitarianism still. It still goes on; it's still happening. You are here as a witness against that, in the present, on behalf of those who suffered in the past."

Yesterday, she said, those spirits filled the chamber.