

Claire Hoy ? Absurd human ?rights? kerfuffle

If Martin Luther King were alive, he would have turned 85 on Monday.

While the famous civil rights activist is dead, as we all know, his ideas and the results of his extraordinary life certainly live on. And always will.

Unlike many who fancy themselves as human rights experts ? particularly those who sit on so-called human rights commissions in this country ? King was not one of those whose mind was so twisted that he couldn't think straight about the subject.

Among his many famous quotes, King once said, ?We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now.?

Rather than looking at the issue as ?us? versus ?them,? as human rights bureaucrats are programmed to do, King's formula ? in the face of real human rights violations, as opposed to faux-rights violations that dominate the Canadian human rights industry ? was, quite simply, equal treatment works regardless of where you come from or who you are.

I'm thinking of this in the light of the absurd human ?rights? kerfuffle that erupted recently at York University when a male online sociology student asked Professor J. Paul Grayson if he could skip a group assignment so he wouldn't be forced to interact with women, something he claimed would violate his religious beliefs.

Grayson, to his great credit, said no. He would not allow a request which violated the equal treatment between the male and female students in his course.

The unnamed student accepted this, writing to the professor that, ?I cannot expect that everything will perfectly suit what I would consider an ideal situation. I will respect the final decision.? He then participated in the group assignment, along with the other women and men in the class.

And that, dear hearts, should have been that. But to think to that is to underestimate the depth of muddle-headedness among human rights technocrats.

When Grayson notified York's administration of the student's request, and of his refusal, Martin Singer, York's dean of arts ? backed by the university administration ? ordered Grayson to allow the student to participate sans women on the specious grounds that, essentially, if the women didn't know their male colleague was discriminating against them, then it wouldn't really be discriminatory. Huh?

Grayson, again, refused. One assumes the noble professor has tenure or else he'd be putting his own job on the line for doing the right thing against the bizarre logic of those who seem prepared to twist themselves into knots so that they can appear to be unflinching champions of human rights.

?I was obliged to conclude that the student's request had to be accommodated,? said Singer. ?I wish I had had another choice.?

He did. To quote former prime minister Brian Mulroney in his famous television debate rebuke of then Liberal prime minister John Turner's , ?You could have said ?no sir.' You could have said ?no.' ?

But he didn't, therefore bringing widespread criticism on his university and apparently sparking numerous e-mails from people saying they might hesitate to send their daughters to York University if they are going to be subjected to such shabby treatment.

The issue gets even more ridiculous when you consider the fact that, because of absolute privacy laws governing the university, they can't even ask what religion the complaining student actually subscribes to and if, in fact, it does bar men from participating in a study group with women.

Grayson did the best he could, contacting a Muslim scholar and Orthodox Jewish leaders to see if their religion would prohibit such gender interaction. They wouldn't.

That's the problem with hard and fast rules which, while well-intentioned, often don't work. There is no reason to ask somebody their religion when they are applying to be a student at York. But when somebody makes a specific ?human rights? complaint, supposedly based on their religion, then surely seeking details on their religion is relevant in trying to decide whether the complaint is valid or simply based on a complainant's personal bias.

It's just common sense. But, alas, in the world of human rights bureaucracies, common sense rarely need apply. The first instinct is to accept the complaint ? any complaint ? as valid, and proceed from there. Oh sure, complaints receive cursory checks before moving up the chain, but a)- the investigators are unflinchingly loyal to a particular human rights ideology, and b)- often, the same people who investigate also ultimately sit in judgment.

Unlike law courts, where accused persons can at the very least make their case and the accuser is forced to prove the facts, the accused in human rights case are normally doomed from the outset.

If you're wondering why, look no further than the mindset displayed by York's administration in this case.

